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シャンドリス、侵攻す

3

Illustrations



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途端に、それまでに倍する魔力を得て、
のたうつ炎が雪と氷の壁を
ぐわっと押し返し、突破した。
圧倒的な炎の渦は真紅の龍にも似た
形状を取り、ジュンナに殺到する。

[In an instant, the writhing flames, having received multiple times the magic they had been getting, pushed against the wall of ice and broke through.

The overwhelming whirlpool of flames took the form of a crimson dragon and rushed for Junna.]



「あのお兄ちゃん、だ〜いすきっ。
早くあいたい。あったらね、わたし、
お兄ちゃんにだっこしてもらって――」

["I real~ly love that boy! I wanna meet him soon. And when I do, I'm gonna have him hug me lots——"]



主な登場人物

レイン

本編の主人公。本人曰く、「傲岸不遜と常勝不敗が売りの、世界最強の男」

ラルファス

レインの親友で、サンクワールの上將軍

シェルフア

サンクワールの姫君。レインに好意を寄せている

ジョウ

シャンドリスの大將軍



【ガサラム】
レインの副官



【セノア】
レインの副官



【レニ】
レインの副官



【ギュンター】
レインの腹心。主に諜報を担当



【セルフィー】
レインの部下



【ユーリ】
レインの部下



【フォルニーア】
シャンドリスの皇帝



【サフィール】
上將軍の一人



【エレナ】
ラルファスの婚約者



【タルマ】
謎の組織の少女



【ジュンナ】
セイルの義妹



【セイル】
シャンドリスの將軍



Prologue: Challenge

It had been roughly ten years ago.

It was on an afternoon deep in the middle of winter enshrouded by clouds as if it was about to begin snowing at any moment.

That day, Joe Lamberck, who had been returning to the capital, Zawoll, after easily beating back the savage tribe that had invaded, felt a penetratingly cold bloodlust and turned to look at the other side of the highway.

There, he saw a single boy off the side of the road.

He was covered head to toe in black, and even his hair and eyes were black as well. His arms and legs were lean, and he looked like he hadn't had a proper meal in months no matter how you looked at him. If you only looked at the state of his body, he looked like a simple penniless boy.

However——his eyes completely overturned the above impression.

His boyishly clear black eyes, which were not due to his innocence, were filled by a bottomless void. He had the eyes of someone who had unfortunately seen and experienced something that most of his peers would never see in their entire lives.

The boy's almond-shaped black eyes changed vividly the moment they met Joe's.

His gaze was as sharp as a whetted blade and was brimming with such force that even Joe, with his long military history, corrected his posture before them.

Right after the boy's eyes met Joe's, his nihilistic eyes became dyed in the

color of great delight, as if he had finally found a house after wandering the wastelands or his first cup of water in a desert.

He had clearly been waiting for Joe.

Joe knew this because, at the same time, he felt an enormous pressure like that of a large cataract bursting. The black-garbed boy lightly spread his knees, drew his right leg back a little, and placed a hand on the frozen hilt of the sword on his waist.

He was positioned to draw his sword at any moment.

With the exception of Joe, the rest of the army paid no heed to the boy. From an outsider's perspective, the boy simply looked like he was spectating the march, and even if he wasn't, no one thought that he would pick a fight with the grand general of Chandrys all on his own.

Only Joe, out of the entire army, accurately saw through the boy's intentions. He had come to challenge Joe Lamberck.

——All by himself.

“Now come. Draw your sword and fight me! Prove to me how strong you are, and if you're really as strong as people say!”

It hadn't been just his imagination.

Even now, he felt the boy's firm will through his keen fighting spirit and enormous pressure. Joe heightened his 'Ki (Ekseed)' born from the warrior instincts that he had engraved into his body and opposed the boy's surge of power.

Without looking away from him, Joe urged his horse forward and drew close.

Just before getting *too* close, he stopped his beloved horse by lightly kicking it in the stomach.

They wordlessly glared at each other up close.

Invisible powers clashed and fought with each other. The boy's fighting spirit

did not decline in the slightest even after he learned how gigantic Joe's was.

Joe even felt as if the invisible aura known as 'fighting spirit' was rising up from the boy's slender figure.

Just as he had understood from the beginning, the boy was clearly picking a fight with him. Though he had no idea why.

However, Joe was honestly surprised.

What is this surge of strength that I'm feeling right now? This fighting spirit that's suppressing my entire body? How long has it been since this boy first grasped a sword? Five years, or eight years? No matter how much I look at him, he doesn't look any older than fifteen, so it must be ten years at most. No, even if it had been ten years.....is it possible for a normal human to gain so much strength in such a short period of time?

——Natural talent.

That was what Joe felt from the boy before his eyes.

If they fought now, he would probably win. No matter how strong the boy was now, he wasn't strong enough to rival him.

But, if he were to nurture this rare talent of his from now on.....would I be able to beat this boy if we should fight again several years later in the future?

Right then, likely for the first time, Joe Lamberck predicted his own defeat. This was the first and last time he stood before an enemy and thought, 'I might lose.'

Even if it was something about the future.

Joe's ponderings caused his 'power' to weaken. The contest between him and the boy collapsed.

Then, the boy, whose eyes had been blazing until then, abruptly lowered his eyes. His violent fighting spirit vanished without a trace. The boy's shoulders slumped in disappointment as he turned his back toward Joe without any

lingering attachments.

—*—He took that as a sign of my cowardice,*

Joe immediately realized as something suddenly welled up in his heart. However, he suppressed it and called out after the boy's back as he walked away.

“Wait! You haven't told me your name yet.”

The boy stopped for a moment.

“—Rain. But there's no need for you to remember. I won't appear before you again,”

he responded soberly before aimlessly wandering off to somewhere.

‘No, I don't think so,’

Joe thought as he watched the boy.....Rain grow farther away.

What had sprouted in his heart was not something as ambiguous as a prediction, but was solid conviction.

For some reason, that boy was trying to raise his abilities to the ultimate peak.

That was why—

Should you walk a life colored with battles from now on, I am sure that we will meet again.....

Chapter 1: Folnier's Decision

Part 1

Rain soon found the person who had been invisibly investigating him as he entered the plaza. He was in a corner, along with two others.

He had never seen the other two before, but the silver-haired man was a face he had seen ten years ago, though he had not anticipated a reunion with him.

He had thought that they would never meet again.

Rain noticed Gunther standing inconspicuously near them and called out to him first.

"What's wrong?"

".....Nothing. I simply thought that something was about to come up."

"I see. That's sensible of you, as always."

Rain laughed and suddenly stopped before he prompted Kris up close to Joe.

He met the other man's gaze from up his horse.

"It's been a while, boy. Our positions have reversed from before. It's been ten years, but do you remember me?"

Joe looked away for a brief moment and turned his eyes to Shelfa. He furrowed his brows, puzzled.

But he then shook his head lightly and turned back to Rain.

.....He had the same reaction as King Leygur. Well, it's only natural to be puzzled after seeing the Little one.

Feeling around his memories of the previous battle, Rain nonchalantly replied,

“I’m not a kid anymore.But I remember you of course, Joe Lamberck. What’s the Fearless God-General of Chandrys doing here?”

“But, you really don’t look twenty-five. You’re surprisingly young.”

Rain frowned as something interrupted from the side.

“.....Who’re you, woman?”

“Wo, woman!”

Folnier opened her eyes wide and promptly allowed her features to crumble as she began laughing like a man.

“I would never stand it for a normal person to call me that, but perhaps this is a part of your personal virtue. I actually find your open-hearted attitude quite reliable,”

Folnier said as she smiled enchantingly. She continued,

“I am Folneir Lucida Chandrys. As my name suggests, I’m the empress of Chandrys. I know this is a bit of a strange place.....but won’t you talk with us for a bit, Sir Rain?”

Even Rain and Shelfa unmounted from Kris after Folnier introduced herself, and both groups began exchanging information regarding the current circumstances. However, Rain’s attention was focused on Joe, and Folnier was zealously observing Rain. Thus, it was difficult to say whether their exchange was successful or not.

That aside, when Rain explained the reason for their march as he’d been asked, Folnier became stiff and suddenly began to rattle on and on.

“Then, you mean to say that you surrendered your royal castle, your final stronghold, and evacuated?!”

“Well, if you put it simply, then yeah. Geez, the world changes too fast. The army, which was the national army yesterday, is a wandering army today.”

Rain shrugged as if it had nothing to do with him.

Rain's attitude had not changed in the slightest even after learning that Folnier was an empress. He did not have any special sense of inherent respect for royalty to begin with. Furthermore, it wasn't even as if Folnier paid Rain's wages. Thus, he did not see any need to speak to her with respect.

The man called Shing or something that he'd been introduced to earlier frowned at him repeatedly, but, naturally, Rain couldn't have cared less.

"Anyhow. Things might change later, but that's what the situation is now. So even if you propose an alliance... Well, it's not like I'll be the one deciding that in any case."

He lowered his gaze to his liege standing beside him and continued, "how about it, Princess?"

Shelfa looked surprised at suddenly being called upon.

Still, after a moment of contemplation, she candidly disclosed to Folnier,

".....While I'm happy for your proposal, the situation is as Rain has just described it. My household no longer commands the entirety of the Sunkwoll kingdom. Only Rain and Lord Ralphus have remained my ally. Is that still all right with you?"

"S, so readily?! In other words, you, a member of royalty who is to become the next ruler, no longer control even a single plot of land?!"

"Oh, you're right."

It was exactly as Folnier had said.

Shelfa opened her bright blue eyes wide and giggled.

She had found it peculiar that, just until yesterday, there had been an uproar about her coronation ceremony and debut, but she had become penniless overnight.

Come to think of it, she had left the castle with just the clothes on her back, so she did not have even a single copper, let alone territory, to her name.

"You're exactly right..... I don't own anything anymore."

“——Wha! A, are you serious?”

Folnier became exasperated and grew angry as if she herself was in Shelfa's predicament. She could hardly believe how composed the girl, a ruler like herself, was.

Shelfa had her own excuse that “even if I don't have any land to my name, I am satisfied as long as my beloved Rain is by my side,” but Folnier would have probably gotten angry if she made her true opinion known.

Both female rulers were beauties that drew in attention, but the quality of their beauty were of different kinds, and they belonged to completely different worlds on the inside.

Only——. Rain was no longer listening to Folnier scolding next to him. He did not see Shing frequently turning his head toward him, worried, and neither did he notice that Gunther had nonchalantly moved next to Shelfa as if he was covering her.

What he *was* paying attention was the surge of power that Joe Lamberck, who was accompanying him, was giving off and was flaring up in the flames of rivalry.

“——Hey,”

Rain said with a low voice.

He braced himself and glared back at Joe, who was staring into him. He felt Joe's 'power' tingle on his skin just by standing there.

“It'd certainly be unexpected.....but are you picking a fight with me?”

“I had no such intentions——”

Joe replied while laughing,

“but, you really haven't changed. You're just the same as you were ten years ago.”

“Yeah? Everyone who knew me in the past usually says that I've gotten more shameless.”

“That’s just on the outside, is it not? I can tell. Your true nature has not changed in the slightest. You’re just as you were then,”

Joe answered quietly. He continued,

“when I met you that day, you were a warrior with eyes like a wolf’s, and you’re still that way today.I would like a match with you at least once.”

“Didn’t we already have one?”

“I wonder,”

Joe said as he casually placed a hand on the hilt of his katana.

Rain had also placed a hand on his magic sword by then. It wasn’t clear who had moved first, but there was no doubt that they had moved at almost the exact same time.

And, Joe spoke his next words almost like a cue.

Even if he hadn’t intended to, he had challenged Rain in the most correct way possible.

“If you think you beat me that day, then you’re sorely mistaken. Nothing..... has been decided yet.”

A dangerous light flickered in Rain’s eyes as he heard Joe’s words.

“Oh~.....? I guess you don’t mind if your slogan of ‘invincibility’ crumbles to dust, huh.”

Fornier’s voice, which was still rattling on beside them, and the hushed whispers of the citizens in the plaza completely disappeared from their minds.

They both knew that the other was a strong opponent. They no longer had the leeway to allow their attention to wander elsewhere.

Joe turned around and instinctively distanced himself. As if they were about to cross swords.

Rain, too, instinctively opened his legs out a little. He never looked away from his opponent’s eyes even for a moment.

Just then.....a breeze blew and carried along a withered brown leaf.

The two opponents drew their swords at the same time and crossed each other.

The leaf was split into four and was blown away.

Clang!!

“Kugh!”

“Tsk!”

They both groaned and twisted their upper bodies to hit back at their opponent behind them as they crossed paths. There was no delay in their movements as both magic swords aimed at the other wielder’s vitals.

Crackle crackle crackle!

The two magic swords crackled as bluish white sparks scattered around them. Rain had cut his cheek and Joe’s shirt had been cut around the shoulder, and both were bleeding lightly from their wounds.

“Rain!”

“Joe!!”

Shelfa and Folnier screamed as they finally realized that something was up. However, their voices did not reach either of their targets.

“——How many decades has it been since someone’s inflicted a wound on me?As expected of you!”

“It’s a bit too soon to start bragging!”

Rain took a step toward his opponent as they locked swords and headbutted Joe on the forehead.

Joe instantly moved to avoid it, but Rain was just a bit faster. Unable to dodge it completely, he took the blow.

“Guh!”

Joe purposefully threw himself to the stone paving behind him and splendidly

flipped backward with one hand on the ground.

He immediately readied his katana again, but—

“How naïve of you! But I’m up here!”

Clash!!

Rain danced through the skies like a bird in flight, half-turned in midair, and swung down his magic sword in a single blow with all of his might. Joe caught the attack, which would have split his head in two if it had hit, spectacularly.

The two clashed, swapping positions and changing their postures in a dizzying manner numerous times. They were so fast that Shelfa and the others saw the illusion that four or five swordsmen were fighting.

Joe and Rain danced in between the two magic sword’s attacks.

They were undeniably in mortal combat, of course, but their moves were so perfect that spectators gazed at them in wonder.

Joe’s radiant silver-white magic sword drew multiple trails of light aimed at Rain’s black hair. They were met by blue flashes of light that had not withdrawn in the slightest. The crossing magic swords created countless afterimages as they clashed repeatedly and scattered sparks as they crackled. The two outstanding swordsmen had easily crossed blades over ten times within the past few seconds.

The people in the plaza stopped moving and had their eyes glued on them.

“You’re not human, are you, you bastard? Are you one of those daemons that were supposed to have been extinct?”

Rain asked, his doubt coloring his words as he jumped back to distance himself for the time being.

“I’m not. Besides, it’s not like you’re entirely human either.”

“Can it!”

With that last yell, the black shadow became a blur and charged forward. The

few meters between the two opponents was basically nothing to Rain. He appeared in front of Joe in a blink of an eye and scythed his magic sword horizontally.

Joe reacted with inhuman speed and caught Rain's blow with his own magic sword.

However, Rain did not miss how Joe's body had wavered in the slightest bit and took the chance to rotate his tall figure and backward roundhouse kick his opponent in the temporal region.

"— —!!"

There was a heavy crash.

Joe blocked the kick with only his right elbow, but his entire body was still thrown back because he wasn't able to neutralize the impact. Rain leapt at him again as his body flew in the air. At the same time that Joe had safely landed on the road, Rain's magic sword fell down upon him like falling light.

Joe avoided the magic sword just before it made contact by twisting his body. Then, he stabbed his katana into the stone paving and used it as a pivot to kick Rain's completely open flank.

"Ugh!"

It was Rain's turn to be thrown back.

However, he quickly regained his posture upon landing. Both opponents ran at each other with a speed that had surpassed the limits of humanity.

"Eat this!"

"That's my line!"

"Both of you, step down!"

Folnier jumped in between the two with her arms spread out as they made to clash once again.

"Your Majesty?!"

“Y, you idiot!”

Joe and Rain, who were about to deal finishing blows on the other, stopped in their tracks in terrified surprise.

It was only possible because they two of them were outstanding knights, and if the match had been between anyone else, Folnier would have undoubtedly died. Joe’s silver-white magic sword had just been about to pierce Folnier through the back, and Rain Siren’s Blade had stopped just before rending through her torso.

Then, Joe let out a sigh of relief while Rain snorted out largely out of anger and with a little bit of a cold sweat.

“Your Majesty, you would have been dead by now if it wasn’t us!”

The two men protested furiously, but Folnier could not have cared any less as she narrowed her cat-like eyes. First, she turned around and said,

“well, don’t be too angry. You’re at fault here too, you know? It was an impressive battle.....but why did you start crossing blades out of nowhere? It’s not like you, Joe.”

“That’s.....”

Joe uncharacteristically mumbled. Folnier pat his shoulder saying, “well, whatever,” before turning to confront Rain.

“You showed me something good. To think that there was someone in the world who could fight on equal terms with Joe.”

“.....Are you blind? Where were you looking? In another minute, he’d have been laying in a pool of blood, saying his last words like, “ugh, in the end, I was no match for you.....””

Joe, who had already re-sheathed his katana, shook his head and laughed as Rain said his piece in such a matter-of-fact manner. He had long since regained his composure.

Folnier’s eye’s sparkled brighter as she said,

“that confidence of yours is only possible because your abilities are the real thing..... You’re most certainly worthy of being called a genius. If not, you

wouldn't have been able to put up a proper fight with Joe at the young age of twenty-five or so."

Folnier's red tongue traced the lines of her lips as she spoke. Rain's anger subsided and he furrowed his brows. She continued,

"I was almost about to make a mistake about you when I first heard that you had abandoned the castle. But there's no mistaking that strength of yours. It was truly greater than the rumors say."

Then, someone called out, "Rain!" When Rain turned around, he saw Ralphus and Gazaram and all of the others galloping back on horse.

That was all fine and good, but Rain belatedly noticed that Gunther had his magic sword at the knight-captain named Shing or whatever's neck, so he asked him what was wrong.

"Nothing. This man was about to draw his sword to assist half-way through the fight,"

Gunther replied calmly.

Shing gulped. Gunther looked so straightforward that Shing could not tell if he was being serious or not.

"Oh, good work. It's fine now.....I'm not up for it anymore, and we were interrupted anyway."

"Understood."

Gunther immediately drew back his magic sword at Rain's words. Shing's trembling breath that followed was impressive. The edges of Folnier's lips lifted as she watched and she drew even closer to Rain.

She laughed as she said,

"Shing is quite skilled himself, but to immobilize him so easily. You have truly skilled subordinates..... You seem to have a good eye for people. ——And yet," she lowered her voice,

"I can't comprehend how a man like you can be satisfied serving under a ruler like *that*."

“What, is this an invitation by any chance? The kind where you’re trying to get me to work under you instead?”

Rain said in a normal volume, causing Shelfa’s, who had been listening in to the exchange, shoulders to twitch.

“.....Do I need to answer?”

Folnier replied, without sparing a second glance at Shelfa. As Rain silently scowled, she suddenly tiptoed and planted her lips on his cheek. He felt her soft, seductive lips.

“I’ll be waiting for you anytime. I’ve grown a sudden interest in you,”

he heard her whisper clearly despite that she had quickly pulled away.

Rain voiced his indignation with a scowl while he scrubbed his cheek. Folnier, who didn’t look like she had taken any offense, saw Ralphus and the others drawing closer and turned around, saying, “let’s meet again, Rain.”

.....From the direction she was going, she was apparently heading for Galfort Castle.

Shing followed after his ruler in a hurry and Joe, too, continued after them silently. But, he turned around to look at Rain just once. When Rain nonchalantly looked back, he turned back around without a word.

“Rain!”

Ralphus unmounted as he arrived and looked to Folnier’s party.

“.....Who were they, just now? I hurried back because I felt uneasy about the man.”

He saw the tears all over Rain’s clothes as he spoke and stiffened. He continued,

“.....What happened?”

“Well, it’s a bit complicated. Anyhow, I crossed swords a bit,”

Rain said, as if nothing had really happened. He continued,

“but the match was already over.Though I don’t know if the other party will agree with that.”

Isn't that right, Princess?

He looked over to Shelfa in a relaxed manner for her confirmation.....and then Rain tilted his head.

Shelfa was despondently hanging down her head. She was suddenly depressed for some reason.

Gazaram, Leni, and Selphie arrived late and separately and looked at Rain and Shelfa while trying to figure out what was going on. Selphie, especially, had a weirdly sharp look in her eyes (or so Rain thought).

To add insult to injury, Ralphus took back the question that he had just been about to ask and was looking at Rain with reproachful eyes for some reason.

In any case, Rain felt the need to justify himself and said,

“.....I didn't do anything. What's wrong, Princess?”

“——Nothing. Nothing at all,”

Shelfa replied in a depressed and quavering voice that heavily suggested that there *was* something wrong.

She wiped away at her eyes with her fingers, and the reproachful looks, including those of the general public, increased tenfold. Naturally, the target of their gazes was none other than Rain.

“.....Like I'm saying, I have no idea either.”

Rain denied his involvement with a wave of the hand and called Shelfa over, pulling her somewhere away from everyone else.

He stooped over and looked into her moistened azure eyes.

“What is it? Did something happen to bring you down so much?”

“.....Just before, I saw her ki, kiss you on the cheek, Rain, and my heart started to hurt a lot for some reason..... I know that I'm being silly.”

Then, she gently looked Rain in the eye and continued,

“and, I finally realized that I can't even reward you properly anymore, and I felt so bad about it..... I must be really stupid to not have realized this until now. But, even still, I still want you to be by my side, Rain.I'm selfish too, on

top of being stupid.”

“Oh, that’s what it is. So, that vixen said something to you, didn’t she? Don’t mind her, it’s nothing for you to worry about. And relax, you’re still super rich as a ruler should be.....putting the matter about your territory aside. Well, we’ll be able to reclaim your lands soon too.”

Rain cast a glance at their comrades, who had their gazes fixed on them, and smiled at Shelfa, who was tilting her head to the side with a still-forlorn expression.

Then, Shelfa’s almost-crying expression came apart and she smiled back at him.

“.....I’ll explain in more detail when we reach the castle. For now, just know that your wallets are plenty rich as they are. And about the kiss.....that’s...”

——*Something like that is basically just a greeting, isn’t it?*

was what Rain had been about to say before he reconsidered it.

After all, Shelfa had withdrawn the smile that she had finally shown and was waiting for the rest of his reply with a nervous expression. He didn’t want to say anything carelessly.

After thinking about what he could say to turn her gloominess back into a smile, what he came up with was something along the lines of, “besides, do you know how babies are made?” and there was no way that he could twist it to make Shelfa laugh so he dismissed the idea instantly.

He wasn’t some drunken greenhorn trying to hit on a girl. Besides, he could already guess what the answer would be without having to go out of his way to ask.

And so, he said the next thing that popped into his head without really thinking about it.

“.....Ah~. If that bothered you so much, then let’s do this. On of these days when we’re in the baths or something, I’ll kiss you all over the place.”

——It was equally vulgar.

Of course, Rain had only said this as a joke in order to lighten up the mood. He thought that Shelfa would laugh again if he said something like this.

However, Shelfa expressed her glee with her whole body and exclaimed, “really?!” while clasping her hands in front of her chest. She was suddenly giddy with joy and her sorrows had all but vanished.

“I can’t wait!”

.....Perhaps I shouldn’t have said that.

Folnier laughed after a quick look back at Rain and the others who were in the middle of a slight dispute.

“We were fortunate to have met with Rain.But I don’t care too much for that princess.”

“Indeed. There would be none more reassuring to have as an ally as he,”

Joe said candidly as he nodded.

He believed that it was only right to acknowledge his opponent’s strength as it was due.

“Putting his actual abilities aside, however, he’s got quite the large attitude.As does his subordinate.”

“Shing, don’t hold it against him just because you were done in,”

Folnier chided him with a wry smile.

“N, never. I simply——”

Leaving the flustered Shing behind, Folnier turned to Joe as they walked and said,

“I’ve been wanting to ask. Joe, why didn’t you use your trump card?”

She had made the suggestion out of simple doubt.

“No. That.....will not work on Rain. I can guess as much without actually having to test it out.”

“Oh? Then, what about magic? Your magic is almighty.”

“It’s not quite almighty. —And besides, he can use magic as well. He’s a Dragon Slayer, after all.”

“Yeah, you’re right, he is. I didn’t believe it at first, but I believe it now. Hahaha.....a Dragon Slayer, huh? It’s my first time seeing one.”

“That’s only natural. You don’t usually see one too often.”

“That’s true too, ahahah!”

Folnier laughed in a cheerful manner. Her mood seemed to have lifted considerably upon meeting Rain. She probably thought that her efforts up until now had been greatly rewarded.

Joe concurred with that sentiment.

Only, he did not think that it would be so easy to make that man their ally.

Folnier finally stopped her content laughing and abruptly looked up at Joe.

“But, even someone as good as you suffered quite the number of wounds, albeit shallow.”

“My opponent was who he was. But Rain should have suffered a similar number of wounds as well.”

“Hmm, that’s true. Even still, it looks like you found yourself in a bit of a predicament, considering the wound on your throat. Not that I could follow what was happening.”

After all, you two were moving too fast for me to see.

—The latter half of Folnier’s words did not reach Joe, who had stopped in his tracks.

He felt like icicles had formed in the core of his body as he hurriedly placed a hand at his neck.

When he pulled it back in front of his eyes, he saw that it was wet with blood. Though small, he had suffered a wound there.

.....And unlike the ones elsewhere, Joe had not noticed this one at all.

It needn't be said that his only opponent had been Rain. It must have happened during their fierce battle.

The wound at his throat quickly disappeared the moment he noticed it.

Folnier, who had also stopped walking, lowered her voice as she watched it happen as if it was normal.

"Don't tell me.....you didn't notice?"

"——No. I see..... No wonder he let me go so quietly despite being so recklessly obsessive about the match."

Joe recalled Rain's earlier words.

"Are you blind?"

"In another minute~"

I had thought that Rain was simply exaggerating..... But wasn't that too naïve of me? In truth, he marked my vital point and I didn't even notice.

——It seems that I've underestimated that man.

As Joe began walking again, he made a quiet vow in his heart.

Should we ever get a rematch.....I'll fight with all my might. Things won't go the same next time, Rain.

Part 2

They had planned to go straight to Galfort Castle, but they arrived a little later than expected. This was because Folnier had said that Safir would refuse an audience with them if they went in with Joe's clothes in tatters.

Joe had absolutely no objections at all, so he straightened up his appearance and they had a meal before going to the castle.

It was highly unusual for the empress herself to attend a surprise visit with no prior warning at all.

However, Joe had always liked her ambitious nature. This was why he never went out of his way to stop her. Besides, he had the confidence that they would never suffer a defeat as long as he was with her.

He had been wary of Rain, but Rain had already left Galfort. Now, there was nothing left to fear.

Thus, they boldly named themselves and had the gatekeeper announce their arrival..... But they were kept waiting for a rather long time in a spacious room because Safir-or-what's-his-name wasn't showing up.

"He's late,"

Shing said impatiently as he did his best not to look at Folnier's legs, which she had crossed rather high up.

They hadn't drunk even a single sip of the black tea that had been served to them, and it had already gone cold a while ago.

"Hmmm.Is it possible that he doesn't believe our identities?"

Folnier looked to Joe in displeasure.

He felt like she was asking for his opinion, so he replied.

"Even still, I cannot praise him for simply keeping us here waiting. It's not the attitude that a ruler should take. He should still take the fact that we could

really be who we say we are into consideration,”

Joe declared.

At this point, he thought that this Safir-or-whatever-his-name-was was far too unreliable. After all, they had already been made to wait for almost an hour.

Just then, the sound of multiple footsteps reached Joe’s ears, though the other party couldn’t have possibly heard the three of them complaining.

“.....It seems that it will be impossible to hope for a proper audience.”

“You mean...?”

Folnier promptly reached for the sword that she had left beside her at Joe’s words. Joe felt that she had great instincts.

“A large number of armed knights and soldiers are approaching. It appears that they intend to capture us.”

Shing, who had a strong sense of responsibility, abruptly stood up upon hearing what Joe had said. He placed a hand on his sword and glared at the door.

After a short while——

Bang!

The door was opened with a scarily unreserved force. A crowd of armed knights and soldiers noisily entered the room with a visibly arrogant man who looked like a noble at the lead. They surrounded Folnier’s group of three in a semi-circle and drew their swords.

Joe immediately tried to step in front of Folnier to cover her, but she was so bold that it was almost fascinating.

She held Joe back with one hand and directly glared down at the noble who looked like the representative of the guards and his men.

Her majesty was so readily apparent that they all dropped their gazes or stepped back when she lifted her chin and slowly surveyed through their

numbers.

“Oh? You bring your swords instead of courtesy when greeting the ruler of another country? Is that how things are run in Sunkwoll?”

“Y, you’re quite strong-willed. However, milady, your carelessness brought this upon yourself. This is the will of our master, Lord.....no, His Majesty Safir. My apologies, but——”

“That’s enough, shut your mouth,”

Folnier cut off the man, who was explaining things with his chest purposefully puffed up with pride, without a second glance. The arrogant noble immediately shut his mouth at the tone of her voice, which was as sharp as a whip.

“I get the gist of the situation. In other words, Safir-or-what’s-his-name thinks that it would be more beneficial to him to capture than to forge an alliance with us. His decision is truly one of a fool who cannot see the larger picture at hand. It seems that it was a mistake for us to have come to this castle,”

Folnier bluntly pointed everything out without hesitation, causing the middle-aged nobleman to twist his mouth into a frown.

He became more defiant and he stopped being polite as he replied,

“then, I’ll have you come along quietly.”

“Who said anything about going with you, fool?”

Folnier said on the spot and looked to Joe. She continued,

“I have no use for fools. Unlike Rain, Safir-or-whatever was a huge waste of time.What do you think?”

“I concur, Lady Fol,”

Joe wholeheartedly agreed.

“Any further attempts on our part will be to futile effort. We’ve already seen the extent of this man called Safir’s caliber.And besides,”

he cast a cursory glance at the enemy soldiers below the captain rank,

“he doesn’t seem to have any capable subordinates either. He wasn’t blessed with worthwhile men, and the caliber of the person in question is lacking.....

We're wasting time simply by associating with them."

"W, whaat!?"

The captain-ranked noble drew his sword, perhaps because he was angry at everything that Joe had said, or perhaps because he still had to play the part of a faithful subordinate.

"I don't give a damn about what you people intend to do! I'll have you come with me no matter what!"

The soldiers hurriedly closed in their encirclement at their commander's signal. Without looking even the least bit flustered, Folnier glanced at Joe and said, "Joe, I'll leave it to you."

"Please leave everything to me."

Joe stepped up in front of Folnier this time. He opened his downcast eyes wide and looked over the enemy soldiers.

His emerald eyes suddenly began to change color.....

Several dozen seconds later, Joe and his party left the room behind them and were running through the palace halls.

"You should've just defeated all of them,"

Folnier addressed her complaints to Joe as they ran. She continued,

"it would have been easy for you."

"Indeed. However, there's nothing to be gained by killing the likes of them."

"It's because the Grand General is kind," Shing said fervently after Joe.

Joe smiled before he knew what he was doing.

Shing had been trying to cover for him.

Folnier neither denied nor concurred and simply scowled as she increased her speed. She took the lead and lightly ran through the corridor.

However, they heard voices demanding them to identify themselves and the sound of a raging wave of footsteps before they reached the exit.

Joe calmly turned around and suddenly turned the palm his hand out against the wall after measuring the distance between the wall and his two companions by eye.

“Light!”

An enormous amount of light and dense magical energy gushed out from his hand and destroyed the wall with a thunderous roar. It resulted in a crooked hole that was large enough for people to pass through.

Amidst the thick cloud of dust, Joe called out to Folnier and Shing, who had stopped in their tracks.

“I’ve created a path. Let us go through here. — —There’s no point in overstaying our welcome.”

Folnier was only surprised for a brief moment. She soon replied, “I agree!” and was the first one to leap through the hole. Shing and Joe followed after her.

Their pursuers were taken by surprise and did not chase after them immediately.

However, it seemed, as one would expect, that the thunderous roar from the destruction of the wall had reverberated throughout the palace.

A great number of soldiers, so many, in fact, that one began to question where they had even come from, bustled out of the palace and began to chase after Folnier’s party.

The three of them ran, somehow avoiding the soldiers until they were unable to go any further because there were too many enemies.

They stopped in the vast courtyard of the castle, the very same courtyard that Rain had unleashed his magic in a few hours prior, although Joe and the others had no way of knowing this.

They turned their backs to the palace they had just ran out of and squared off against the soldiers that had pursued them.

“Tch. What a pain, there are like two hundred of them?”

Folnier spat out, looking truly annoyed as she looked at the soldiers.

Joe and Shing stood with Folnier in between them and restrained the soldiers that had come after them. The enemy had drawn their swords and had encircled the three of them at a set distance.

The only direction that the soldiers did not approach from was behind them. That was because they were backed up against the palace walls.

“That’s as far as you go!”

A different noble from before walked out from the crowd of soldiers. He continued,

“we’re not going to kill you to anything. It’d be best if you quietly let yourselves be tied up and beg His Majesty for mercy.”

“Insolent fool! How dare you speak to me that way! I’m still an empress, so hold your tongue!”

Folnier shot back without missing a beat.

The noble’s face immediately flushed red, perhaps because he wasn’t used to being scorned.

“.....His Majesty is currently resting because he’s not feeling well. But he still gave us his orders. His Majesty has decided that it was not necessary for him to meet with you and has told us to capture you instead. In other words, my words from before were not meant to be taken as a request!”

“And neither was mine, you bumbling idiot! To begin with, the reason that we visited with only the three of us is because we had the confidence to get away even if things ended up like this. Haven’t you even considered that?”

What? the noble finally began to show his apprehensions.

Folnier looked at Joe out of the corner of her eye and asked, “sorry that I’m calling on you twice in a row, but you’re up again.”

“Understood. It wouldn’t be impossible for us to cut through two hundred of them.....but this way is much faster,”

he said as he moved in front of her without hesitation.

The soldiers began to stir at his firmly resolute words.

Only the nobleman with thin eyebrows remained cocksure.

“Hmph. Enough with your bluffs. As if there’d be multiple monsters like Rain! And you probably used up all of your magic with during your attack before,” he sneered.

Instead of responding to every little detail, Joe simply spread out his arms in silence. His elegant, muscular body began to emit a faint light. He closed his eyes before they changed color like they had before.

From beside him, Folnier requested,

“Joe, bring out a dragon! I’ve yet to see one!”

It was only natural that she hadn’t.

Aside from a smaller species of dragon called little dragons, proper ancient dragons did not approach places where people lived. They typically avoided humans. There were rare occasions where dragons attacked people to eat them, but those were the exceptions among exceptions.

Joe smiled wryly and answered, “understood,” as he concentrated.He drew up an image of the strongest mythical beast that he had seen several times before.

Ah, aieeeee!

Joe opened his eyes when the pathetic screaming began.

Enshrined in front of him was a creature that was at least fifteen meters long.

Its entire body was covered in hard scales and its tail was thick and long. The tail alone was several meters in length. Black thorn-like spikes stuck out in sporadic clumps at its back. A low growl.....one that was reminiscent of distant thunder rang from the depths of this thick neck.

Joe turned to take a look at the dragon. The eyes resting on its large cranium were so red that they seemed to be boiling with rage.

He inspected the dragon’s giant, dazzling eyes from up close.

“Yes. I’ve only seen one from a distance myself.....but this is what it looked like.”

It was of passable workmanship.

Joe smiled at Folnier, who was captivated like an excited child as she watched the dragon, and nodded at Shing, who was pressed flat against the wall, to signal that everything was all right before standing next to the dragon he had created.

He observed the soldiers who had begun to flee and scatter with ashen faces. He had thought that the nobleman would have been the first to run, but the latter was surprisingly courageous. Or, perhaps, he was simply holding on to his pride. He stopped falling back even as he continued to tremble and rebuked his men who had broken formation.

“Don’t falterrr! This thing just appeared out of thin air! There was nothing there before! It’s an illusion, a mere bluff!”

The stampede died down, possibly because the commander’s shouting had taken effect. Or, it could have been because the soldiers were more afraid of the consequences they would later face for running away. Sunkwoll nobles were infamous for being merciless to their subordinates.

“L, look! You can’t fool me! Your bluff won’t work. Ha, hahaha!!”

“A bluff, is it.....? I suppose you can call it that.”

Joe did not deny the noble’s claims.

After all, he technically wasn’t wrong.



But——he had failed to understand a crucial point.

“You are correct in saying that this dragon is an illusion of my creation. However, if you are unable to believe that it’s only an illusion even in the slightest.....then you will die.”

After Joe gave his warning, he turned to his illusion and ordered,

“now, go!”

as though it was under his command.

“Gugyaaaaaa!”

The dragon roared so ferociously that the soldiers felt like their souls would leave their bodies and slowly began to move their way.

Each and every time its legs, covered in lustrous black scales, moved as it walked across the earth, the heavy pressure of the hard impact of its footsteps seemed to gorge into their lungs.

This was also a part of Joe’s spell, of course. Both the sound and the vibrations were merely illusions.

The soldiers saw deep footprints left behind in the dragon’s wake, but they only saw this because they were entrapped within Joe’s illusions. There were no actual footprints there.

But the soldiers did not know this. A third of the soldiers that had pursued Joe’s group suddenly fell to their knees at the illusionary dragon’s first roar. They looked at the approaching dragon with faces so pale they looked like the dead. They backed away while still on their knees, or on their behinds, as they tried to run away, perhaps because their bodies would not listen to them.

Thump, thump——

“Gugyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

The dragon's second howl shook the atmosphere, and ferocious vibrations it caused reached through the soldier's very bodies (or so they thought).

"It, it's reaaaaaal!"

someone shrieked like they were coughing blood.

This was the final straw. The majority of the soldiers who had still stood their ground finally began screaming unintelligibly and were scrambling to escape. Even the soldiers who could not run crawled in an attempt to get as far away from the dragon as possible.

There were only a rare few who thought that they could face the strongest mythical beast and win. Dragons were even worshipped as gods in some areas. The soldiers had, intelligently enough, abandoned the idea of fighting it from the start.

However, only the noble from before remained stubborn. Even as he slowly but surely ran away, he aggressively continued to yell, "don't ruuun, or you'll be punished for it later, you bastards!"

But even then, he made no move to step out and fight himself.

"Joe, shut that fool up! It makes me want to vomit when I see commanders who are only all talk!"

After Folnier said this, Shing furrowed his brows and said,

"indeed. The troops that he commands are something else,"

and sympathized with the soldiers.

"Then it cannot be helped. Though, I would have liked to settle things without having to kill."

Joe sighed and focused his consciousness on the illusionary dragon.

The dragon's mouth suddenly opened wide.

It sucked in the air with a loud roaring sound. Upon hearing the illusion, the noble, who had been unpleasantly stomping on the ground, turned around. He was about fifty meters or so away. Conveniently enough, there was no one around him. Everyone else had already fled. Having finally understood this, the noble opened his narrow eyes and looked around in a panic. He finally decided to turn tail and flee.

However, it was too late.

The dragon had achieved its objectives.

Gugyaaaaaaaaa!!

After letting loose a deafening howl, the illusionary dragon released its gigantic, crimson breath. The noble, who had instinctively turned to look at it, stopped in his tracks with a blank look on his face. The writhing orange flames swallowed him as he was and continued to extend forward. Joe had calculated the direction that the flames had been emitted from, so no one else was caught up in the blaze. The dragon's breath hit a few trees, but they remained completely unscathed.

The noble, who had fallen face-down, remained after the blinding breath attack had finally faded. Evidently, he did not believe that the dragon had simply been an "illusion" as he had claimed to. Though, that was generally the case.

"Then, shall we pull out?"

Joe looked to Fournier without putting out the dragon.

"Yeah. But, aren't you able to take over this castle all by yourself?"

Fournier asked in a teasing manner.

"Unfortunately, this consumes too much magic. Especially if I'm bringing out large-scale illusions like this. I cannot use this attack enough times for it to be of use during a siege. And, it's ultimately just an illusion, so it won't damage the castle itself..... Besides, even if we managed to capture the castle, we wouldn't be able to hold it with just the three of us."

Folnier smiled suspiciously as Joe offered his honest insight. Joe had seen her smile like this before.

.....In all of Joe's memories, nothing good have ever come from Folnier when she smiled like that.

And so, he braced himself a bit when she said,

"no, not with the three of use,"

and cheerfully continued,

"I've decided, Joe. Let's leave for now and come back again with a car."

".....Surely you're not..."

"I sure am."

Folnier stuck out her abundant chest and surveyed Galfort.

She placed a hand on her slender waist and sonorously declared,

"we, Chandrys, will have this kingdom for our taking!"

Joe took a long and hard look at Folnier. Then, just to make sure, he asked,

"are you serious?"

"How rude. I'm always serious."

"——Certainly, Safir is hardly a noteworthy opponent. However, that man is also here in this kingdom.Please don't forget that he——"

Joe pointed at the gigantic mythical beast he had produced and continued,

"once defeated the strongest of mythical beasts. He has accomplished the impossible. Aren't you taking Rain a little too lightly?"

"I know he did! That's why, in regards to Rain's and the other one——er~, that's right, Ralphus. I won't touch the territories they govern. My only enemy is Safir. Surely, you have no complaints about that."

"Perhaps——"

Shing cut in, somewhat exasperated,

"are you trying to make Lord Rain and his crew yours, little by little, along

with the rest of the country, Your Majesty?”

“Hahaha. You’re pretty sharp, Shing. But yeah, I think it’d be nice if that happened. There’s at least some room to negotiate. I’m not a stingy ruler. I’d gladly give a man of Rain’s caliber a generous reward in return. I’d reward Ralphus accordingly as well, of course. I’d even be fine with giving that princess of theirs an allowance to live off of, too,”

Folnier said in a crisp voice.

.....Evidently, she was dead serious.

Chapter 2: Intrusion

Part 1

A few days had already passed since they had arrived at Rain's castle, Cortecreas Castle.

Nothing of note had really happened during that time, except that they had been in a rush to make arrangements for the soldier's lodgings.

However, it wasn't that nothing had happened at all.

For example.

Rain had gathered people like Shelfa, Ralphus, Selphie, and others who weren't very busy and looked like they had nothing better to do and proposed to show them "something nice that'll be good for the eyes."

All of them had tilted their heads to the side in confusion as Rain led them to the warehouse in the castle basement and opened the doors wide in a theatrical fashion.

They were all astonished when they looked inside.

There was a pile of what society would commonly call "a mountain of treasure" stocked so high that it could have reached the ceiling. After a backward glance at everyone else, who were standing stock still, Rain lit a nearby lamp, causing the jewels and golden coins to lustrously reflect back the light. Surely, the sight of it was what one would call poison to the eyes.

“How is it?”

Rain brushed back his hair with a hand and grinned as he took a look at the others.

He puffed out his chest, inviting them to be impressed, as he proudly said,

“I’m rich, aren’t I? It’s all thanks to my daily practice of moderation.”

Then, Ralphus suddenly blew his cover from the side.

“— —This is the treasure from the warehouse at Galfort, is it not?”

“Look here, you……. Think about the sweet, sweet aftertaste in the air, dangit. If you’d kept your mouth shut, I could have paid my respects to these fools as they stared stupidly with their mouths open wide for a little while longer.”

“Just, just who was staring stupidly?!”

Senoa, a noble, was the first person to return to her senses as she pointed at the mountain of treasure with a trembling finger. She continued,

“wha, what is the meaning of this?! Why is the royal family’s treasure in a place like this?!”

“Hey, well, sorry that it’s in *a place like this!*”

Rain explained the gist of the situation after taking a moment to glare at Senoa. Only Leni and Shelfa immediately sighed in admiration, however, as Senoa knit her brows, Ralphus smiled wryly, and Yuri and Selphie were too busy earnestly staring at the treasure that they could not respond adequately.

“That was disappointing; c’mon, be more impressed. You don’t seem to understand the value of money, do you? With this much, we’ll be able to fight without worry for the next hundred years or so— —hey, Yuri! The hell are you doing?! Don’t just casually pocket stuff!”

Yuri, who had ginger~ly shoved in a few jewels in her pocket, gave a forced smile before returning them to the mountain of treasure.

Then, she smoothly changed the topic and said,

“buut still, isn’t it impossible to teleport things from one place to another with magic?”

“No.....not normally. But it’s possible to transport things from one specified magic circle to another. Look, there are magic circles in each of the four corners of the warehouse, see? I had similar circles drawn in the treasure warehouse at Galfort. It was Gunther’s work. Though, I’m greater than he is for ordering him to do it in the first place.”

Only Shelfa looked at Rain in honest respect upon hearing about the circumstances behind the treasure. The rest simply looked more or less exasperated. Senoa even looked reproachful as she scowled.

“Still, isn’t this royal property? I don’t believe that this is something that you are allowed to simply take out of your liege’s castle.”

“Look here, you. If I didn’t bring it here with me, that idiot Safir would just use it all for himself. I was taking the royal family into proper consideration, you know. So quit complaining!”

Rain was laughing inopportunely when he boldly claimed that everything had been “for his liege” and only one person out of the people present took his words at face value. Still, his claims were technically honest, so no one openly disagreed with him for the time being.

Yuri even gave him a sidelong glance that seemed to say, “what the heck is this weirdo thinking?”

“Thank you very much.”

This time, it was Shelfa who had spoken before anyone else with her head lowered. She continued,

“I am always being helped by you, Rain.”

She looked up at Rain with a smile.

Then, once again, Senoa obstinately insisted,

“still.....I am still uneasy about this. It gives one the image of plunder, or something similarly underhanded...”

To which Rain flatly replied,

“there’s no such thing as being underhanded in a fight! Winning comes first!”

Senoa simply sank into silence, perhaps because she was exasperated from the bottom of her heart.

“Now then, now that we’ve finished talking about this.I have a little something I’d like to discuss with you, Princess.”

“Yes?”

“We have all this treasure here. I’d like to spare a little to share with the people who accompanied us here as a reward. Well——”

Rain pointed at the stupidly large mountain before him,

“even if we give out a bit of a reward, I doubt that this mountain of treasure will decline in the slightest.”

“I don’t mind at all, of course! Please feel free to share more than just a little.”

Yuri pumped her fist at Shelfa’s generous words. Selphie, too, placed her hands on her cheeks and said, “I, I’ve never even held a gold coin before——” like the impoverished girl she was.

Rain shrugged as he saw their reactions.

“No, giving out too big of a reward would come with its own problems, so let’s keep it small. Ralphus, do you agree?”

“It’s not my treasure. As long as Her Highness has given her consent, I have no complaints. I’m sure everyone will be elated.”

And thus——

Striking while the iron was still hot, each and every soldier received a sudden reward that very day. Naturally, the rewards were standardized based on rank, and those above the captain rank received a sizable sum and knights received a sum that was a little smaller. Still, even new recruits, at the bottom of the hierarchy, received a proper reward. Incidentally, even new recruits of the lowest rank received enough of a reward that a commoner could have lived in luxury off of it for a few years.

The treasure of the Sunkwoll royal family had only lost a mosquito bite's worth of wealth even after giving out such lavish rewards.

After Rain boldly proclaimed, "this is the Princess' way of thanking you for your hard work!" as he publicly handed out the reward money, 'Shelfa's popularity,' which had been on the rise, rose explosively yet again.

Rain and Ralphus generally gave out monetary rewards to soldiers who were commoners as well, unlike other high generals, but the sheer amount of money given out this time was what it was.

The entire castle was buzzing with soldiers saying, "let's beat up that shitty noble bastard for the Princess!" Everyone had heard rumors that the previous king, Shelfa's father, had treated her coldly, and had brazenly decided to take pity on her for it.

It needn't be said that the sudden happy reward brightened everyone's mood.

The morale in the castle had risen to ridiculous heights.

Deep in the night of the very next day.

Cortecreas Castle was enveloped within the depths of deep slumber. Astel, the region in which the castle was located, was one of the most desolate regions at the southernmost reaches of Sunkwoll, and true, untainted darkness descended upon the land at night.

The closest town to the castle, Claralta, was several kilometers away, and most of its residents were sound asleep by midnight. While there may still have been stores conducting business late at night in the capital, Lydia, there wasn't a soul to be seen in the area. After all, Rain had built his castle in such an isolated place on purpose.

On top of the castle ramparts, lit only by the moonlight, appeared a single middle-aged man.

It was apparent that he had scaled the ramparts because of the ropes and rake-like tool around his shoulder, but if anyone had seen his sneaky behavior, they wouldn't have been blamed for thinking that he had suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

Moreover, his clothes were similar in color to the blocks that composed the ramparts, so no guards stopped him for identification purposes.

The man, who was wearing a hood that covered his face, surveyed the pathway across the top of the ramparts before finally making a satisfied nod. Then, he began to run down the pathway without making a single sound. He frequently dropped something white on the ground as he ran.

A colorless, odorless smoke arose from the egg-shaped white things when they cracked as they hit the ground.

Eventually, the smoke was fanned by the occasional breeze and spread deep into the courtyard.

The man stopped when he saw the watchtower at the end of the pathway and dropped down into the courtyard using his rope.....

Two squires, armed only with swords on their waists, patrolled the courtyard in green uniforms.

Regardless of the fact that most people were asleep, it was impossible to expect that *everyone* was asleep because the castle was a strategic location. There was still a hefty number of soldiers who were awake for security and guard duty.

The squires were a part of the number of soldiers tasked for guard duty in the middle of the night.

"Hey, have you heard?"

the squire with more seniority asked his younger counterpart.

"Heard what?"

"About that guy you know, Miran? He was promoted to squad leader."

“EH?”

The younger squire stopped in his tracks as a strange sound squeezed out of the depths of his throat.

Since his partner did not stop to wait for him, he rushed after the former's back in a panic.

“Wa, wait a sec. Why'd he skip straight to captain all of a sudden?”

“I don't know either. But, according to the rumors, Lord Rain approved of Miran's service from the shadows and promotion on special exception.”

“Huh..... I see, so Lord Rain did that.”

The two of them were squires in service to Rain, so they were used to going along with his incessant whims.

Thus, the young squire accepted the situation as it was without finding anything strange about it. He knew very well that Miran was a diligent and honest man, so he was actually quite happy for him.

Because, after all——

“Then, even people at the bottom of the ladder like us might become a captain one day as long as we stay diligent and work it up slowly and steadily..... right?”

“Mmhmm!”

The senior squire nodded with large gestures.

As they surveyed the area with upmost attention he said,

“at the very least, Lord Rain isn't stingy. It's perfectly possible. But, the opposite is just as possible as well. This is something I heard from Miran, but ——”

“Oh, I know, I know! I've heard that one before!”

The younger squire interrupted in a state of excited agitation.

He had long since stopped caring about his surroundings and continued,

“it's about M, who's liege lord stripped him of his job, right? Miran was

trembling while he told me about it.”

“What, so you already know..... But, there’s apparently another one. I know a squire named Grecko..... Lord Rain caught him playing hooky while he was supposed to be out patrolling once, and Lord Rain made absolutely sure to tell him about “G, who was caught and grilled by his liege lord,” or so the story goes. Apparently, G was treated so horribly that he didn’t even want to talk about it.....and it was Lord Rain who dished out his punishment.”

The two exchanged weak glances.

They had both coincidentally been thinking the same thing.....that it was more than possible that their liege would dish out some truly insane punishment!

And so, both of them nodded repeatedly to the other, as if they were warning each other that nothing good would happen if they played hooky.

However——

Just as they silently agreed on this, the younger squire suddenly collapsed to his knees. Then, he fell over to the side, completely asleep.

“Y, you idiot! The consequences for playing hooky are scary enough as they are! So how much——”

*worse do you think things will be if you completely sleep on the job——*was all the senior squire managed to get out before he became dizzy and finally realized that something unusual was going on.

He drew out his alarm whistle in a panic——but that was all that he managed to do. He, too, fell over on top of his colleague.

Immediately after, the intruder slipped by, snorting as if he was making fun of them.

——But. He soon stopped in his tracks.

It was because a slender man had suddenly appeared in front of him wearing clothes that stood out even less than his own.

“.....Why didn’t the drugs...”

Gunther Valoa drew his sword and attacked without bothering to listen to how the sentence ended.

—Without even drawing a breath.

Clang!

Sparks scattered into the darkness. Gunther's magic sword repelled his opponent's and attacked two, three more times in pursuit.

The difference in their strength became readily apparent and surprise and panic began to color the other man's countenance.....

Part 2

The secluded princess, Shelfa Iras Sunkwoll, went to bed early even according to Astel's norms.

Incidentally, even after the fact that the time zone differed slightly in comparison to the capital, the residents of this region retired for the night before nine, on earlier days, and around ten at latest because night life hardly existed in the area.

By that time, most people had finished eating their meals, were soon to tire of socializing with their families, it was pitch black outside, and they were beginning to nod off—generally speaking.

Shelfa went to bed rather early even by their standards, and was usually asleep in her bed by eight o' clock.

Recently, she had tried to stay up as late as Rain did, but Rain himself had stopped her, so she reluctantly returned to keeping to her own circadian rhythm.

Well, even when she had tried to stay up late, she could not avoid the fact that she naturally became sleepy before it was nine.

And so, Shelfa was generally sound asleep by midnight. However, she had coincidentally woken up in the middle of the night and was staring at the moon outside of the window from the bed.

She had woken up in the middle of the night like this rather often as of late. The reason for this was simply because she was sleeping in Rain's room.

"For starters, it's hard for intruders to get here because this room is on the top floor, so let's have you use it for the time being."

She had tried to politely refuse at first, but she ultimately caved in after Rain

had persuaded her otherwise. *It's not like this room is exceptionally extravagant or anything, so you don't need to hold back.....* he had said when he had vacated the room for her.

When she had reluctantly accepted his offer, she had found that, as Rain had assured her, the only notable pieces of furniture in the room were the bed, the round table, and the wardrobe.

Evidently, Rain only used his room to sleep in. The room was so plain that no one would have guessed that it belonged to the lord of the castle.

Shelfa, however, was more than satisfied with it. She was on cloud nine every night.

Why? It was because it was the place where she could feel Rain's presence the most without being directly at his side. When she laid down in bed, she was surrounded in Rain's fragrance, or rather, his scent, which made her very happy.

Shelfa was so elated, in fact, that she had rolled around multiple times in bed as she gazed out the radiant moon. And then, she giggled to herself because of her strange behavior.

She was always like this. Her loneliness and sorrow vanished as long as she was thinking about Rain. That was why she naturally made the effort to prolong her happy thoughts—

And soon woke up completely.

She casually decided to take a walk around the castle. She would probably become sleepy again after walking around a little.

Shelfa blinked her large eyes in the dim room, having thought that it was unlike her to think of something like this.

Shelfa had always been, and still was, afraid of the dark. It needn't even be said that she absolutely couldn't stand "horror stories." The lights of a few candles flickered in a corner of the room because she was too afraid to sleep in the dark. Incidentally, she also believed in monsters.

Truthfully, she didn't like sleeping alone.

Truthfully, she wanted to someone to sleep with her and stay by her side.

However, it wasn't as if she would be okay with just anybody taking up that role, and she only really had one person in mind for it. Being alone together with anyone other than Rain would just be horribly awkward, and she would actually rather be left alone in that case.

Shelfa sighed after having thought through all of that. She didn't want to trouble Rain by being selfish.

Shelfa decidedly got up and put on a gown on top of her nightclothes. She made sure to properly close it up in the front so that she wouldn't lose any warmth and put on her shoes.

Her preparations were complete. She was still a little scared, but this was Rain's castle. Plus, Rain himself was (somewhere) within the castle walls.

That's why it'll be okay, Rain will come for me if anything happens. It's all right because Rain is stronger than any monster.

Shelfa tottered over to the door, unlocked it, and stepped out into the hallway.

She jumped a little as soon as she did.

A shadow had been sitting directly against the opposing wall and had looked up when she stepped out.

She was almost about to scream, but her voice soon changed into a cry of delight instead.

"Rain!"

"Yo. What'cha doing up so late?"

"No, I just happened to wake up——"

and I decided to take a walk..... Shelfa explained as she stared fixedly at Rain. She continued,

"um..... What are you doing here, Rain?"

“Hm? Oh..... Well, that’s, y’know...”

Shelfa had a sudden flash of revelation as she watched Rain trip over his words.

“Are you doing this for my sake, by any chance?”

“— —Well, yeah. I mean, we have to take all the precautions we can, right?”

Rain nimbly stood up and lightly pat Shelfa on the head. He continued,

“I’m doing this because I want to, so don’t worry about it. Besides, I use a type of self-hypnosis to fall asleep and wake up on command, so it doesn’t really matter where I sleep.”

“You slept in the hallway for me even at Galfort, didn’t you? I.....never realized.....”

Shelfa’s chest grew hot and she threw herself onto Rain. She knew that she couldn’t always allow Rain to spoil her, but she was still happy for it.

Rain scratched his chin with his pointer finger and said,

“it’s not a big deal. And it’s only been a few days since the uproar with the assassination attempt and whatnot. Seriously though, I slept outside pretty often while I was travelling the world, so sleeping in a hallway is like heaven compared to that, you know?”

Rain caressed her cheek when Shelfa, still clinging on tightly, raised her head without a word. A grin flashed on his virile face. He continued,

“or what? Did I just get a huge increase in ‘love points’ by doing something that wasn’t even a big deal to begin with?”

“.....Yes. My feelings for you grow stronger by the day, Rain. The past me would have never believed that it was possible to care for someone this much.”

She felt that Rain would be troubled if she began to cry, so she did her best to hold it in. But there might have been tears forming in her eyes even still.

“You’re easily moved, aren’t you? But, there’s always a reason behind all of the things that I do. And as expected, I was right on the money to be on guard today.”

Rain's smile vanished and he moved to cover Shelfa, who was still attached to him, behind him. He continued,

"but this worked out. If you hadn't come out, I would've gone in to wake you up myself."

".....Eh?"

"We have intruders. From the presences that I've felt, there are two of them. Though I think one of them's a decoy."

"So the other one.....is nearby?"

Rain nodded.

Shelfa naturally leaned into Rain's back.

Just then——

The candles that were set up at regular intervals flickered and were put out. All at once.

The hallway was enshrouded in darkness.

While she would have been scared out of her wits had she been alone, Shelfa was completely fine at the moment because Rain was by her side. Even she thought that she was rather devious. Just by being near Rain, she was completely fine with being in the dark, which she was usually afraid of.

".....The darkness doesn't really matter to me. Well, it's still annoying, so——light!"

As Rain quietly mumbled to himself, small lights burst into being on top of the candlesticks with popping noises. Each light acted as a magical torch and lit up the hallway so brightly that the candles from before couldn't even compare.

"Come on out. I know you're there,"

Rain said in a low voice.

Then, as if they were responding to him, someone stepped out from the stairway landing. They were wearing a hood, so it was difficult to make out their face. However, it was possible to tell that the figure was a girl by her slender frame and the way her clothes hugged the curves of her body.

“You’re not half bad. It was worth coming all the way out here in person,” she said as if she was licking her lips.

She took off her hood.

Her snow-white hair was gathered into a ponytail. Surprisingly, she still looked like a relatively young girl age-wise.

However, she appeared to have more grit than her appearance would have initially suggested and did not appear even the slightest bit timid. She proudly stuck out her chest and stared holes into Rain with her crimson eyes.

She did not have the shadowy look of someone who belonged on the backstreets like the assassins from the other day had, and instead she looked like she had a truly animated and bright personality.

“I thought I eliminated my presence..... When did you notice?”

“It’s one thing if you forcefully erase your presence with magic, but just eliminating your presence won’t work on me. I noticed you guys since even before you climbed the ramparts. Was the guy who was wandering around the courtyard supposed to be a decoy?”

“Hm~m, yeah, I guess. Or at least that’s what I think he thought he was doing? I don’t really care. So, what happened to him?”

“I think he probably ran into Gunther, my subordinate. Oh, and his presence disappeared just a moment ago. Gunther’s strong after all. I ordered him to catch people alive in situations like these, but since the other guy’s presence disappeared, I think he offed himself once he was cornered? Probably.”

The girl didn’t change her facial expression even after hearing that her comrade had died. She simply tilted her mouth in bored displeasure.

“Hmmm. So, he died, huh? That’s so lame of him, geez.”

“That’s pretty dry of you. Wasn’t he your comrade?”

“He might have thought so, but I certainly didn’t. He insisted on coming along as an escort when I said I was leaving. I tried to sneak away alone at first, but he found me. It’s really, seriously lame how he insisted so hard on tagging along just to get killed off on his own. ——And, oh!”

The girl abruptly covered her own mouth after saying so much. Shelfa wasn't really sure, but perhaps it was because she had accidentally said something that she shouldn't have. The girl continued,

“oops, I said too much. I take that back, okay?”

The girl laughed, embarrassed, and waved her hands in the air. What was up with her?

Shelfa tilted her head to the side.

Rain seemed to be similarly confused as he said,

“you're a strange one..... What'd you even come here for?”

“The place that I'm affiliated with——”

she pointed at Shelfa,

“wants to kill her, but I don't really care about that. I just happened to hear a whisper in the wind that you were stronger than we expected, so I came to see for myself. I'm really interested in strong people.”

“Wait, hold on a sec!”

Rain raised a hand to interrupt the girl.

Rain ran a hand through his hair as if he was trying to collect his thoughts as Shelfa stood to his side and looked up at him.

“So this is how it is: You're a member of the organization that spurred on an assassin's guild, and on top of that, you're someone pretty high up in that organization.....or you're the relative of someone who is. Else, you wouldn't have had an escort. And, you're also one of the more frivolous members of that organization.”

“Yeah, it's just as you say.”

The girl opened her eyes wide. She continued,

“you're Rain, right? You're really smart. You got all that right with just a small hint.”

“Well, I guess. ——But, I'm not gonna let you go just because you flatter me.”

Rain placed a hand on his magic sword's hilt and continued,

"this works out. There's a lot I want to hear from you. Why don't I show you down to the dark cellars?"

"What happens when we get to the cellar?"

"Well, are you up to answering everything I ask you and telling me everything about the situation here?"

The girl answered immediately.

"That's impossible. No matter how wild and rampart I usually am, asking me to betray my relatives is a little too much."

Rain mumbled, "did you seriously just call yourself wild and rampart?" and frowned. He continued,

"then, it's off to the cellars for you."

"Like I said, what happens when we go there? Are you gonna torture me or something?"

"Probably? It can't be helped if you're not gonna tell us anything otherwise. They'll probably hang you up from the ceiling and whip you, turn you upside down and drown you in a jug of water, and strip you naked and drip hot candlewax on you or something? It's not really my job, so I can't say for sure."

"That, that's a bit..... And that last one was especially indecent, so I'm gonna say no. And besides, you really like to joke around."

The girl grinned and lowered her hips.

She changed from a relaxed posture to that of a warrior brimming with bloodlust.

"I don't really like being locked up. So I think I'll resist just a little bit in that case. Besides, I haven't seen how strong you are yet."

"Stay back a little, alright?" Rain said to Shelfa as he calmly gazed at his opponent. He continued,

"you do know that it's pointless to resist——"

Rain abruptly turned away mid-sentence. He twisted his upper body just a

brief moment later.

To Shelfa, who had been watching him from behind, it looked like Rain had moved to avoid something. No, he actually *had* dodged something.

She knew this because just as Rain had moved, there was a loud smack against two different places on the wall around them and a part of the wall had been shaved off. Two cracks ran down the wall to her right.

Shocked, Shelfa moved from her position directly behind Rain to one more diagonal to him in order to get a better view of what was going on.

Her eyes met the mysterious girl's.

The girl laughed with only her eyes and she sharply dropped down her seemingly empty right hand and swung it up again.

There was another smack as Rain simultaneously jumped up, evading something Shelfa could not see. This time, the attack landed where Rain's feet had been and diagonal cracks appeared through the hallway floor. They also appeared on the wall to Shelfa's right a brief moment later. The smacking sounds continued.

Shelfa still could not see anything. No.....she felt that something had just flashed just now.....

In any case, Shelfa did not feel any danger and allowed herself to be protected because Rain seemed to be able to see whatever it was.

He jumped up, to the side, and twisted his body..... Rain continued to evade whatever it was with leisure to spare.

"Hmm~m, you're amazing. It's not just a fluke either, so can you see this!?"

Said the girl as she continued to wave around her right arm. There was a little bit of sweat forming on her white forehead. Even still, she made no effort to stop moving. She continued,

"even if you can! You can't attack back if you're dodging all the time! So, what'cha gonna do?!"

Smack, smack!

The hitting noises sounded again and Rain easily evaded. Still, Rain seemed to have already grown bored.

“Look here, you.....keep your underestimation of me to a minimum. This isn’t even an issue about whether I can see it or not in the first place!”

The moment he said this, Rain casually stuck his right hand off to the side and grasped something like he was stopping it mid-motion.

Then, he made the motion of pulling on that something. When he did, the girl let out a cry of confusion and stumbled forward.

Just then, even Shelfa, who hadn’t been able to see anything before, was able to see “it.”

Something like a rope was extended in between Rain and the girl. It flashed in the candlelight the moment it was pulled taut. The girl let go of that something in a panic and retreated to where she had been standing before. At her feet was a rod-like object that was the perfect size to hide in your hands.

Rain laughed smugly,

“I don’t know what it’s made of, but it wasn’t a bad idea to make the main part of the whip invisible. Your use of it wasn’t half bad either. But, I don’t fight by just depending on my eyes. So attacks like that are useless against me.”

Shelfa silently agreed. After all, Rain hadn’t even drawn his sword yet. If Shelfa had been in his place, she would have fainted at the first attack (because she couldn’t see it at all), but it was probably child’s play for Rain.

The reason that he didn’t aggressively go on the offensive was likely because he was trying to capture her without hurting her if possible.

“Oh boy~.....you’re really strong, not half-assed at all. That’s amaazing! I think I might start regretting coming here a bit.”

“Isn’t it a bit too late for that.....? I wouldn’t say you’re weak, but you’re not as strong as I thought you’d be, huh. Are all of you’re comrades like this? That’d be pretty unimpressive, considering that you guys were able to threaten an

assassin's guild."

The girl sulked a little when he said that, but then she sighed as if she had given up.

"I was always the child that was left out of things. But let me say this: some of my comrades are like monsters. You'd be better off not taking them lightly."

"Things would've gone along faster if they'd showed up instead to begin with. Well, whatever. I'll just have you explain stuff like that in detail, yeah?"

Rain returned the conversation to its original topic.

The girl scratched her head and slowly stepped backwards.

"Like I said before, I can't tell you that even if you kill me. I've got a pretty strong sense of duty, all things despite. ——And with that, see ya!"

"Ah, hey!"

The girl's candor was deserving of wonder, to say the least. She turned her back to Rain without any hesitation and readily fled the scene. She was astonishingly fast, too, and Rain and Shelfa could hear her footsteps going down the stairs by the time their confusion had set in.

"So that's how you're gonna play!"

Rain made to chase after her.....but then stopped in his tracks. He turned around to Shelfa behind him and beckoned her over.

"Yes? Oh....."

He suddenly held her up when she walked over to him.

"I'd be a little uneasy leaving you behind, but this way, we can both chase after her no problem."

".....Yes."

Rain broke out into a smile as Shelfa looked down at him.

She nodded, still somewhat dazed. She hadn't really heard what he had said. Still, she was extremely happy that he was holding her.

Rain held on to her in her content and suddenly began running.

She could feel him accelerate drastically in just a few steps. He jumped down the stairs one-half of the way at a time and looked down outside from a glass-less window. She didn't know how the girl had pulled it off, but the girl was already running out in the courtyard.

“Oh~? Aren't you quite fast at running away? But you're still too naïve!”

Rain stepped down a few steps and said to Shelfa, “close your eyes if you're scared.”

She didn't immediately understand what he was talking about, but Shelfa promptly shook her head.

Nothing was scary as long as she was with Rain.

“Alright, let's go!”

Rain jumped from where he was and leapt right out of the window. Shelfa felt like she was floating midair and heard the wind whistling by her ears.

She couldn't really see her surroundings because of the way Rain was holding her. But she was sure that her vision revolved dizzyingly as they fell from a considerable height.

Oh, Rain is turning over and over like a kitty as we fall..... Shelfa felt a chill down her back as she realized this and began to laugh.

She didn't like heights, but it felt nice to fall like this. It was unfortunate that they had landed on the ground so soon. She hardly even felt any shock from the landing.

And then, Rain began to sprint again.

——*So fast!*

The palace behind them grew distant in an instant.

It was only natural, but Shelfa became giddy again because they were traveling at a speed that was impossible for her to run on her own and laughed again.

“You’re pretty brave.”

Rain smiled as he ran. He continued,

“most people scream after jumping out a window.”

“Not at all, it felt really good! I want to jump down it with you again, Rain!”

“Hahaha!”

Rain laughed out loud, for once.

He usually just grinned, so it was truly a rare sight.

“Alright, we’ll go faster then!”

He accelerated yet again.

He wasn’t out of breath at all, and his pace was stable. His stamina seemed to be inexhaustible, as expected of a Dragon Slayer.

The ground below them flowed past as if they really were flying. Someone, likely a squire, tried to call out to him, but they ended up passing them in a moment.

At this point, Shelfa was lucky that the suspicious man from earlier had only planted his drugs at the opposite end of the courtyard. If not, Rain aside, Shelfa would have fallen asleep by now.

On the other hand, the girl was busy being chased.

The girl, who had turned around after getting a bad feeling about something, let out a vulgar “geh.”

She had turned just in time to see Rain carrying the princess as they happily jumped down the window together.

The girl had had a means of jumping down the window safely, but no matter how hard she looked, Rain appeared to have jumped just as he was. She thought that it had been suicidal, but the princess whom Rain was carrying was gleefully laughing in mid-air for some reason.

Then, when the girl thought that they would have died from being crushed on the ground after the fall, Rain spun around and around like an acrobat and landed safely—only to immediately begin pursuing her.

The girl let out another “geh,” upon seeing this.

Wha, what's with him!?

Why is he totally fine after jumping down from a place like that?!

That in and of itself was a creepy mystery, but even creepier was how Rain and the princess were laughing like they were having the time of their lives while chasing after her.

The princess was giggling happily while being held by Rain, and Rain, too, was laughing out loud.

He was chasing after her with unbelievable speed as he laughed.

It was super scary.

Wh.....why are they laughing?

The girl shuddered as she increased her speed.

She really didn't want to get involved with them.

—However.

She was the fastest in terms of running speed among her comrades, but evidently there was always someone who was better than the best.

Rain had already caught up to her for the most part by the time she had looked back again. His stamina must have been inhumane, considering that he was still carrying the princess with him.

*Or, Rain's not just simply 'strong' and there's still another secret to him.....
Come to think of it, we have someone like that too.*

The girl was not particularly attached to the depressing “society” that she was a part of and did not truly view the people around her as her comrades, but she

did value her younger sister deeply. *But, she might not acknowledge me as her comrade, at least not to the extent that I care for her..... That might be why she didn't tell me anything.*

Although she was treated as someone in an important position, she was still always left out of things and no one told her any important information.

Thinking about that made her feel a little lonely.

Regardless, the girl regretted the fact that she had left silently without doing anything. Even if Rain was a little strong, she did not think that he was someone she couldn't handle.

"Give up already!"

Rain's voice called out from behind her. He continued,

"Kris is just about the only being in the world that I can't chase down. You think you can run from me?!"

The way he laughed as he said this was so scary she wanted to die.

Plus, even the princess was giggling. *Seriously, what's with them?*

And besides, who the hell is Kris?

The girl had fallen into a panic, but still managed to somehow reach the bottom of the ramparts.

Without slowing down, she took out a thirty-centimeter-long rod from her bag as she ran and cried,

"grow!"

It was a command word that she had registered to in advance.

The rod, which was technically a magic item, promptly began to activate its magic and grew in length before her eyes.

It surpassed the girl's height in length and grew even still.

The girl pointed its tip into the ground and bent it with all of her might. She used the resulting recoil to jump high, very high, into the air. The rod continued to grow even as she jumped and carried her safely to the top of the ramparts.

She landed safely on the pathway.

“Return!”

She said another command word and returned the rod to its original state. She was finally able to regain some composure.

She stuck out her tongue at Rain and the princess who had just reached the bottom of the ramparts then.

“Sorry! But you know, I only made a few people pass out, and it’s not like I killed or hurt anyone, so let me go, okay~?”

She wa~ved her hands playfully.

But, contrary to her expectations, her opponents did not seem flustered or aggravated in the slightest. Instead, Rain showed off his white teeth, which were white even in the darkness, and flashed a grin.

The girl had a fiercely bad feeling about something.

“You sound like you think you’ve completely gotten away already. But things won’t go as you think they will!”

Then, still carrying the princess, Rain bent his knees.

No way!?

But alas.

Rain had leapt off the ground. Unbelievably, he soon rose past the girl’s head. With the radiant moonlight at his back, the black-haired figure twirled once in the air.

‘*That was kinda beautiful,*’ the girl thought in the corner of her mind despite that it was neither the time nor the place to do so.

Rain gently landed on the pathway atop the ramparts as she stared at him blankly.

He was only about a few meters away from her.

The princess had begun gleefully giggling again.

Is she okay? Is there something seriously wrong with her? No, I'm more of the problem right now.

“——Pft.”

Rain smiled a dreamy bold smile with his hair tossed by the wind.

“This's as far as you go. There, look behind you. I even have a failsafe.”

“Eh?”

The girl, who had opened her cat-like eyes wide open, turned around in a panic. She thought that it might have been a trap, but she could not help but turn around.

——And, much to her dismay, there really was a failsafe.



Standing a little way from her with an air of composure was a young man who somehow looked preposterously morose.

Just when had he snuck up behind her?

Rain called out to him in a friendly manner,

“hey, great timing Gunther.”

In response, the man, still looking grim, gave him a light bow.

Th, this might be bad.....

The girl wasn't one to give up so easily, but even she was starting to sweat nervously.

Rain gave the girl, who had completely lost all of her composure, a cool glance and checked in with Gunther first.

“What of the other intruder?”

“.....He killed himself, likely because he didn't want to be captured.”

“That's what I thought.”

“My deepest apologies.”

“——It's fine. There's nothing you could have done since they're the one who decided to die on their own. Don't worry about it,”

Rain reassured Gunther.

Then, he gave the flustered girl one last notice.

“It's as you've heard. And just to be clear, while he's not as good as me, Gunther's pretty capable. The likes of you have absolutely no chance of breaking through him. Just come quietly.”

And then, a shrill whistle blew in the distance with great timing. Either one of the guards had belatedly noticed that something abnormal was going on, or Gunther had arranged for it beforehand.

“Hear that? A large crowd of guards will be here soon, too.”

At Rain's words, the girl looked down to the courtyard, looked down the bottom of the ramparts, and finally turned to look at Rain with a troubled look on her face.

She placed a hand at her mouth and looked at him with teary eyes. She looked at him with upturned eyes.

"whimper~"

".....Don't whimper at me. It's too late to play cutesy. The night's still young, so why don't we have a change of scenery and a nice, long, talk, yeah? A charming cellar and a nice cell are waiting for you. I'll even throw in a stinky meal as a plus."

"I'd be troubled by that..... C'mon, please?"

Clap!

Her snow white ponytail bounced as she clapped her hands together as if she was praying.

"Heyy, just let me go. I'll be in your debt! I'll ab~solutely pay it back, yeah. So, please?"

Rain furrowed his brows.

"You're an important source of information from my point of view, you know? Why would I let you go?"

"J, just do something about that, please?! I'll seriously be in your debt. I'm the type of person who takes her duties seriously. C'mon, please?"

She bowed her head numerous times with her hands still clasped together. She continued,

"besides, I'm not going to tell you anything even if you do capture me. And I might even commit suicide in that cellar or whatever of yours. That'd weigh on your consciousness too."

"Nope, you're not the type of person who'd commit suicide. From what I've

seen, you're quite a sturdy character."

"N, no way..."

"——Um,"

Shelfa, who was still being carried by Rain, interjected.

"Yeah, what's up?"

Rain tried to put her down.....but the person in question looked unwilling as she lightly shook her head, so he kept her where she was with a wry smile.

"Um..... She hasn't hurt anyone, and she didn't come here to kill me, so....."

"So, you want me to let her go?"

Shelfa nodded with all her might.

"It's possible that she might come to our aid one day as well....."

"Ah, you have a good point. As expected of a ruler's magnanimity. Hurrah for our future beautiful Majesty!"

Though the girl in question had simply been carried around at this point.

Her face, which had been on her verge of tears, changed into a bright smile as if those tears had been a lie.

Rain made a noise of contemplation as he looked up at the heavens and said,

"are you sure, Little one? If that's what you've decided, then it's not something that I'm about to say otherwise about. But.....are you really sure? We can also choose to let her go after capturing her and getting information out of her first."

"Ehh~, like I was saying, I won't spill a thing even if you capture me."

Shelfa smiled as Rain told her girl to shut up.

"It's all right. I had a lot of fun, in any case. Please let her go."

".....I see."

Rain said nothing more and simply nodded with a smile. He continued,

"you can go now."

“Huh?”

The girl stiffened up with a surprisingly shocked look on her face. Despite all of her pleading, she apparently hadn't expected to actually be allowed to leave.

“I, I can, for real? You're not just saying this so you can wham! at me with my back turned, are you?”

“Like I'd do something that cheap. I'm against it, but there's nothing I can do if my liege says you can go. ——Oh, but at least tell us your name. What is it?”

“My name..... It's Talma.”

“Tama? That sounds like a cat's name. Now that I look carefully, your face looks like a cat's too.”

“It's not Tama! It's Ta-l-ma!”

“I know, quit yelling. I was just teasing you. Make sure you don't forget about that debt of yours, Talma. Got it?!”

Rain made sure to call Talma's debt into attention before he jerked his chin to the side.

He was signaling for her to hurry up and scram.

“S, sure. I won't forget. I'll def~initely pay it back.”

Talma guaranteed and, after gathering back her dignity, bowed to Shelfa. Then, she moved to jump down the ramparts——but looked back at Rain and the others one last time.

“Hey, listen!”

“What? There isn't much time.”

“Look, I'll tell you just one thing.You should try inspecting Galfort Castle carefully. You might figure something out if you do.”

“Galfort.....”

Why?

Rain wanted to ask but shook his head instead. *She's not gonna tell me anything more anyhow.*

“Alright. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“And one more thing. This is more for my personal interest. You two are super familiar about how you guys talk and stuff for a liege and her retainer; did you guys do it already?”

Rain scowled.

He scowled so hard that he could feel the wrinkles forming on his brow.

“——Actually, I’ll have you captured and executed instead!”

“Ahaha! It was a joke! See ya, and thanks!”

Sm~ooch!

Talma threw air kisses at not only Rain and Shelfa, but at Gunther as well, and jumped down the ramparts like it was the natural thing to do.

As Rain and the others watched, she pulled out something cloth-like mid-flight and spread it out about her head.

Then, the cloth opened up like a large air bubble and slowed down the speed of her fall. It was probably another magic item.

Talma promptly fled into the darkness after she landed.

She was considerably fast, even from Rain’s point of view. She had undoubtedly prepared a horse somewhere along the way as well.

“.....What a weirdo.”

At Rain’s words, Gunther looked up and asked,

“should I shadow her?”

“Well.....that’s probably the best thing to do. But, I’m sure that the Little one over here will object.”

Shelfa smiled, still in his arms, and drew her cheek against Rain’s chest.

“Please let her go. She’s not a bad person. ——And before that...”

“Um~, I have a pretty good idea about what you want to say. You want to ask what she meant when she asked if we’ve done it already, right?”

“.....How did you know?”

“Well it was obvious.”

A flood of guards finally rushed to the bottom of the ramparts as Rain snickered.

Spearheading the group was a sleepy-eyed Leni (someone probably had to hit him awake), who immediately shouted as soon as he saw Rain and Shelfa.

“H, how can this be!? Th, the General is eloping with the Princess!”

The hell is this idiot saying?

Rain instinctively looked down at Shelfa in his arms as she zoned out.

She was only wearing nearly see-through nightclothes and a gown.

Well..... He supposed he could see how one could come to that conclusion.

Shelfa didn’t deny anything and simply blushed deep red, so Rain had no choice but to yell back,

“Wake the hell up!”

Part 3

Just like Galfort Castle, Cortecreas Castle also had a large mess hall.

There were only a very small number of upper-class knights who had territory to their name in most of the countries on the continent, including Sunkwoll. They generally had nothing to do with territory at all unless they were at least of the general class (and high general at that).

Not to mention ordinary knights, who only had the wages that their lieges paid them.

In other words, most knights and soldiers that served a liege lord were permanently stationed in a castle. That was nothing to say of fact that this particular castle currently employed many wandering knight orders and soldiers.

Still, traveling soldiers only made up a small portion of the whole if you considered the big picture.

Thus, it was indispensable to have a large mess hall within the castle walls. If you went to a mess hall during mealtimes, you could usually eat a meal for free as long as the liege lord was not a miser. They even employed dedicated chefs to serve the meals. Among the lords who owned territory were stingy misers like Safir, who made it a point to withdraw food expenses from his men's wages, but that was simply because they were cheapskates.

Fortunately, Rain was not one such cheapskate, so the mess hall was always bustling with people during meals. Most soldiers, who were poor, had decided to eat there since it was free anyway.

Moreover, Rain himself shared the sentiment.

Anyone with the rank of knight or higher was given a personal room in the castle and a maid would bring them their meals. Not only that, but they could freely choose what to eat from a menu. Unlike lower-class knights, they were allowed to order whatever they wanted to eat.

However, Rain, despite being the liege lord, ate at the mess hall with the normal soldiers just like he had during his mercenary days.

I'll eat the same things as my soldiers and live just like them, thereby garnering their respect and winning them over!

—Rain did not have any underlying motives such as the one mentioned above. He simply thought that, *'I don't need anyone to bring me my meals when I can just go and eat myself.'*

He wasn't a picky eater, so he didn't feel like ordering something from the menu either.

To begin with, despite his social status and his usual bragging, Rain lead such an unbelievably modest lifestyle that even Yuri, who was strict with him, acknowledged it.

Unbeknownst to everyone, he was actually more than willing to splurge if the opportunity presented itself, though he'd shown no signs of doing so as of yet.

Just about the only thing that he really consumed in large quantities was alcohol. It was truly the largest exception to the rule, and he drank like a fish. This was all despite that he couldn't get drunk because of his constitution.

Rain did not have any calculations or underlying motives for his behavior, but coupled with his overwhelming strength, it made him rather popular with the lower-rank soldiers.

And, alcohol aside, there was one more high general in Sunkwoll who, like Rain, disliked receiving special treatment.

Someone sat down in front of Rain as he silently packed down bacon, bread, and soup into his stomach.

"You're unusually early today."

When Rain looked up, he saw Ralphus beaming at him as he placed his food

tray on the table.

“— —I guess. Actually, I haven’t slept. I was with the Princess until she fell asleep. All kinds of useless topics of conversation blossomed in her, what with yesterday being as it was. I missed the chance to sleep. Well, it’s not like I usually sleep that much to begin with.”

Whoa!!

The soldiers who had been listening in on the conversation with their ears perked up like rabbits let out a silent exclamation.

That being:

“When he says that he was with the P, Princess until she fell asleep, does that mean that they were alone together in a bedroom until then!?”

I, I’m so jealous! Can you please swap roles with me!?

Blatant whispers echoed around them. Yet, everyone faced forward and gave their meals their undivided attention in an embarrassed manner after Ralphus calmly surveyed the mess hall.

— —Rain began to think.

There are rare individuals who can overwhelm others while remaining silent without having to yell or purposely admonish, and he’s one such man.

Anyone with a guilty conscience would immediately become restless just by having Ralphus looking silently at them.

.....Come to think of it, Joe Lamberck was that kind of guy too. They have pretty similar personalities.

Ralphus confirmed with him as Rain was lost in his thoughts.

“By the way, it’s only been a day since yesterday. I know you’d never make

any oversights because you're you, but who's guarding Her Highness right now?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. Gazaram's with her out in front and Gunther's watching over her from the shadows. They'll be enough for the time being while I eat breakfast."

"I see, that's good,"

Ralphus smiled as he nodded.

Then, he nonchalantly said as he ate with his fork,

"let's talk for a bit later."

"Sure, I don't mind. But I explained everything that happened yesterday to you right after."

"Yes, I know. But it's fine, is it not? We haven't had much time to talk lately. Humor me."

Rain grudgingly nodded and got up from his seat.

He went to get seconds instead of waiting blankly for Ralphus to start.

"Why don't we take a walk while we talk?"

Ralphus had said after breakfast, so Rain had shrugged in consent.

Inside, he had actually thought something along the lines of, 'two men on a walk together, really?' but he gave up on the notion because talking at the table would have been uncomfortably restrictive.

They walked a little to the place where the suspicious man had released suspicious drugs the night before.

Ralphus suddenly broke the ice,

"regarding the intruder from last night.....you let her go on purpose, didn't you?"

"What,"

Rain raised his brows,

“you noticed?”

“Well, yes. I figured as much when I heard that you were the one who chased her down. There’s no way you would have simply let her leave if you had hunted her seriously.”

“I.....guess. Oh, and let me say this first, but it wasn’t my idea. It was the Princess’. She told me to let her go, so I just obeyed.”

“I see.”

Ralphus looked at the trees, which had lost all of their leaves, and nodded without getting upset. He continued,

“she is a kind person who is easily able to sympathize with others.....”

“Well, it’s fine as long as we take up the stricter stuff. That’s our role.”

“Yes. And, what of the organization.....or rather the society that the girl was associated with? Do we have any information on that?”

“Nope, nothing,”

Rain said readily as he spread out his hands. He continued,

“but it looks like its certain that they want to kill the Princess. The kid called Talma said that she “wasn’t interested” in it yesterday, so she’d probably the exception in the group.”

“Then, “inspecting Galfort” is our only lead.”

“Well, I’m sure a lot of things will be made clearer with time..... But it’s going to be a pain in the ass. We already have a lot of annoying stuff going on even without it.”

A few patrolling guards saluted the two when they passed by. Once the guards had passed out of earshot, Ralphus lowered his voice and said,

“at this point, I’m beginning to doubt that the late king distanced himself from Her Highness just because he could. There might have been a reason behind it.”

“He locked up his own daughter in the castle and barely ever let her see the light of day..... Plus, he hardly ever visited her himself, right? Hmm...”

Rain brushed back his hair and growled.

He had always thought that King Douglas had taken matters regarding his daughter too far, even if she was to be a secluded princess.

After all, he had rarely even allowed his retainers to see her. From what Rain had heard from Shelfa, he knew that she had basically been imprisoned within the palace. She had not even had the freedom to move about as she pleased unless she drew her attendants' eyes elsewhere first.

It was entirely possible that he and Shelfa would have never met during the ball that day if he had not broken the rules and entered the palace grounds.

However, a princess normally would have appeared on the center stage during public events at the very least.

Then, she would have been shown around to statesmen and princes of other countries so that others could bring up the topic of marriage behind closed doors. That was what some would call a princess' role. A princess of a country was never allowed the freedom of romantic love. They were generally used as tools for political maneuvers.

Sixteen was not an early age for a daughter of the royal family to get married. And yet, King Douglas had never tried to show her off anywhere.....

"At first, I thought that old man was just being cold, but he might have had a reason for it.....I suppose. It's fishy. He might have had a reason that he couldn't even tell you, his faithful retainer. It's also possible that it has to do with why people are after her too.And that reminds me..."

Rain recalled his first meeting with Shelfa and spoke to Ralphus about it. The affair had been buried deep within his memories until then.

The portrait that had looked exactly like Rain, and that immense wave of power.....

Ralphus furrowed his brows and said,

"—this is the first time I've heard of this. In other words, Her Highness had predicted her meeting with you.....is that it?"

"That's normally how it'd go..... But, she looked pretty surprised about it herself. She looked like she was wondering why the portrait she had just drawn

looked so much like me. ——And let me ask just in case now that we're talking about her, but do you feel anything from the Princess?"

"I've never felt the kind of pressure you were talking about from her. But it's strange. It wouldn't be strange if I was insensitive to such things to begin with. But Rain, I can properly feel 'power' from you. Even while we're just standing here like this."

"I know what you're trying to say. You're wondering why you're the only one who can't feel anything from the Princess.....no, it's not just you. No one else can feel anything either. The only other person who's had the same impression of her as me until now was King Leygur..... Even Joe didn't look like he was shocked by the pressure she exerts, now that I think about it.....or at least he didn't look it."

"Can you.....still feel it now? Do you still feel her 'power' when you're near Her Highness?"

"Hmm.....about that. Until now, I was caught up on just the pressure she was exerting..."

Rain thought for a moment and let out a sigh. He continued,

"now that I take a step back to think about it, it's different from the direct 'wave of power' that I felt from Joe or King Leygur, and it felt like the Princess brushed upon it intentionally.....using Ekseed, or 'Ki.' But there's no way that she'd be able to do that kind of thing, and she hasn't shown any indication of being able to do so either."

After a pause, he added,

"and, on top of that immense 'power' It felt more, well, as if something else ——though I don't know what—— was mixed in. While I felt pressure, it wasn't a negative feeling. Actually, it felt kinda good. I can't tell you why it felt like that, though."

Rain personally had no idea what to say despite that he had brought up the subject himself.

Still, Ralphus asked further with a serious look on his face,

“tell me what you think. What do you think about Her Highness’ secret?”

At this point, they were definitely sure that there Shelfa did indeed have a secret to her.

Right as they reached the heart of the matter, a skin-piercingly cold wind blew and rustled their hair.

There was no one around them during their walk, save for a few patrolling soldiers.

Rain narrowed his eyes and casually said,

“lessee. Like, maybe that child is actually a daemon, perhaps?”

His friend did not laugh.

He looked at Rain as if he was holding his breath.

Rain broke out in laughter and hit Ralphus across the back.

“Quit taking me so seriously. I just wanted to try suggesting it ever since our run-in with Leygur. That child is unquestionably human. I guarantee it.”

Rain had stopped addressing Shelfa by her proper title as “Princess” in the confusion of the moment, but Ralphus did not seem to have had the leisure to notice.

“.....Don’t surprise me like that,”

Ralphus said wryly as he slowly spread out his stiffened cheeks into a smile.

Rain laughed mischievously in response.

“Just let me say this too, but there are other mysteries involved here. I’ll address the ‘organization’ that after her as ‘them’ for now. Why are they after her life now, of all times? Even if they did have a good reason for wanting her dead, why does she have to die *now*? She has the strongest bodyguard by her side right now. Don’t you think it would have been so much easier to kill her before?”

Naturally, the “strongest bodyguard” Rain was talking about referred to himself.

He had said it jokingly because he disliked it when the mood got dark, but

Ralphus had not even let out a chuckle.

Instead, he sounded at a loss as he said,

“— —I was wondering about that as well.”

“Hmm, so you noticed.The hint about investigating Galfort probably has to do with it, but— —”

Rain suddenly stopped in his tracks mid-sentence.

He ignored Ralphus, who was looking on at him, and muttered to himself,

“no, wait. I think.....I just had an idea.”

“Did you figure something out?”

“I.....guess. I must be losing my touch to not have thought up of something so simple until now.”

Rain’s voice lowered just a little as he continued,

“I’ll ask you just in case, but if I’m right, there should be someone who can use magic among that child’s close relatives— —”

Rain closed his mouth upon seeing Ralphus’ expression. Apparently, he had hit jackpot.

“Her Majesty the late Queen was a mage.....but how did you know? Even most of the royal family isn’t aware of this.”

“Well, I’m a genius so all it took was a little thought.”

He did not sound as playful as his words might have suggested. Rather, he sounded as if it would have been better if he had been wrong.

Rain shook his head and began walking again.

It had only been a simple idea, but that stray idea of his now held a considerable amount of credibility.

Unable to hold back any longer, Ralphus asked again,

“don’t keep it to yourself, tell me what you’re thinking.”

“Just think about it. What about her has changed between the time before they targeted her and now? There’s one thing that’s absolutely changed for

sure, right? You should get the gist of things if you think along those lines.”

Rain stopped talking and shook his head again. He continued,

“it might be better if we ignored what hints Galfort Castle might have and remove them from the equation altogether.”

“Whoa, wait a minute.”

Ralphus looked at Rain, exasperated. He continued,

“we can’t just do that. And others aside, wouldn’t it be better for us to know?”

“Well, you have a point there. But in all honesty, I don’t give a damn about what her secret is or who she really is. That child isn’t responsible for whatever that might be. I’ll investigate Galfort, but if the truth I find doesn’t have anything to do with her safety, I’m planning on leaving alone it as it is.”

“Hmmm.....”

Ralphus was silent for a while before he smiled agreeably.

“I see, that sounds like a decision you would make. I, too, don’t believe that Her Highness should be held responsible for whatever secret she might have. Regardless of what may come up from the investigation, we’ll keep it to ourselves.”

“Yeah. Well——”

that’s only if it’s a secret tame enough that we can.

Rain decided to ultimately keep the rest of his sentence to himself. Nothing could be done at the moment even if he had said it out loud.

“Anyway, I do believe that dealing with Safir should come first for the time being,”

Ralphus nonchalantly changed the subject after a quick look at Rain’s reticence. Perhaps he knew all too well that Rain would stubbornly refuse to say anything more.

Rain was grateful for his consideration as he replied,

“I’m not that worried about Safir, but...”

“Something troubling you?”

Rain nodded to indicate that there was.

“It’s that strong-willed empress, Folnier. She had the look of someone who wasn’t up to anything good.....”

Rain recalled Folnier’s smile, which he knew would be difficult to deal with, and let out a soft sigh.

Chapter 3: The Arrogant Girl

Part 1

Shelfa, who had woken up in a happier mood than usual, ate the meal that the maid had brought her with a grin.

The reason for her cheeriness was self-evident. Not only had she unexpectedly been able to talk with Rain for a long time last night, he had also promised to teach her 'sword skills' today.

She had asked him about it before but hadn't had the chance to act upon it until she finally had the opportunity to last night. Thinking about it that way, Talma's intrusion had not been a bad thing for her in the slightest.

At least, that's what Shelfa thought.

Thus, she had wanted to eat quickly and go to Rain as soon as she could, but Shelfa ate much more slowly than other people and her progress with her meal with slow. It wasn't even a lot of food because she was a light eater, but she still had to take her time.

She grew impatient halfway through her meal and decided not to eat the rest.

Rain might get angry if he sees that I didn't finish, but I'll have him forgive me for today.....

In truth, she wanted to eat with Rain and not alone. But Rain almost always ate at the mess hall every day and Shelfa could not resolve herself to do so no matter how hard she tried.

She was still opposed to being in front of a lot of people. To put it bluntly, she

was hypersensitive to other people's gazes and it was still difficult for her to get used to strangers. It might be because she was alone so much of the time.

Still, she wanted to gather the courage to eat in front of people soon, or she might be stuck eating alone forever.

She looked at her half-empty bowl of soup and sighed.

—She couldn't do it today, but she'd try her best again tomorrow. She'd gather the courage somehow. She couldn't have people bring her meals forever. If she didn't, her dream of eating together with Rain would remain simply as a dream.

Shelfa resolved herself once more, though her motives were a bit impure. She returned her cutlery to the silver cart and looked down at the clothes she was meant to wear while training. They were white shorts and a similarly white sleeveless shirt. They looked easy to move around in, but she wasn't quite sure if that was all she was supposed to wear.

.....It was probably all right.

Still, it was too cold wear only that, and she was too embarrassed to anyhow.

And so, she decided to borrow one of Rain's jackets. Luckily, she had already asked him about it in advance.

She opened the wardrobe, which was filled only with black garments, and picked out a leather coat (which was naturally black as well). She stuck her arms through the sleeves and tried it on. The coat fell down to her ankles.

It only stood to reason. Shelfa was about 160 cm tall, while Rain was easily over 180 cm.

She couldn't help but feel like the clothes were wearing her and not the other way around when she looked at the life-sized mirror that had been brought in to the room for her.

But.....I feel like I'm being held by Rain when I wear this.

That was enough for her.

Shelfa took up the rapier that Rain had prepared for her and gently opened the door with a smile.

“——Whoa!”

Standing in the hall was Gazaram, acting as Rain’s relief, who let out a small exclamation upon seeing Shelfa.

He stroked his stubbled chin for a while and hmm~m’ed.

“Um.....does this look strange?”

“Oh, no, not at all. I was just a little surprised because you were wearing the General’s coat.”

He broke out into a smile and bowed. He continued,

“I’m a little late, but good morning. The weather is great today.And incidentally, what is that sword for?”

“Good morning. Thank you always for your hard work.”

Shelfa gave a polite bow before answering,

“I had Rain promise to teach me sword skills today.”

Unlike usually, she was able to answer clearly today. Recently, Gazaram had been by her side the second most after Rain in order to guard her, so even Shelfa had finally become used to the old warrior by now.

Gunther and Gazaram were two matchless individuals whom Rain typically had guard Shelfa, so Shelfa’s trust in them had naturally increased in turn.

In addition, Gazaram was like a paternal figure to her, as she had hardly ever spoken to her real father.

“Oho~, sword skills? I’m mighty jealous. I’d like to learn a few things from him myself. ——But, you’ll be taking off your coat during training, no? Won’t you be cold wearing only that?”

“Rain said that this was easy to move in, and I’m perfectly fine.”

She felt a chill the moment the words left her mouth. She placed a hand at her mouth and let out a small sneeze.

Her cheeks flushed bright red.

Gazaram looked worried as he said,

“will you really be all right? You shouldn’t push yourself.”

“I, I’ll be fine. Um, I’m sure I’ll warm up when if I give it my all during training. Besides, I’m the one being trained, so I want to do as Rain says.”

“I see.....”

Gazaram massaged the area around his eyes in exasperation and advised her, “then, you should at least button up for now.”

As Shelfa obediently did as she was told, the aged warrior nonchalantly added,

“still, you must really like the General quite a lot, Your Highness.”

In turn, Shelfa nodded in absolute honesty and replied,

“yes.”

Then, her cheeks glowed redder still as she continued,

“.....I love him.”

Gazaram, who had been smiling in a teasing manner, opened his black eyes wide and froze.

“Oh.....well that’s.....how should I put this?”

His surprise slowly transformed into a wry smile. He continued,

“it’s an honor. Thank you for telling a newcomer like me. Still——”

He took a look around him and lowered his voice as he finished,

“it’s all right to tell me because I’ve got tight lips, but it’d be best not to let others hear of this. Though.....it’s a different matter entirely if you were to make an official announcement about it.”

“I’m aware.”

Shelfa was sure that she was making a lonely smile right now. She continued, "I know..... But, it's because Rain trusts you, Lord Gazaram. This isn't something I just tell anyone about at random."

"That's.....I'm honored yet again."

Something other than reverence was mixed into Gazaram's voice. When Shelfa looked up, she found that a silent emotion had spread across the warrior's scary visage, which told tales of his many battles. Gazaram continued, "I'm sure it's true if you're the one saying it, Your Highness. I see, he trusts an old man.....no, someone like me. I was aware of this to some degree, since he gave me this role, but it makes me happy to hear someone else guarantee it."

"Rain doesn't usually let his feelings show, so it's hard to tell sometimes," Shelfa said with a smile.

It somehow made her very glad to know that someone else loved Rain, just in a different manner than herself.

It made her feel all the more familiar with Gazaram.

"But, you'll know if you watch him closely. Rain trusts you very deeply, Lord Gazaram."

Gazaram chuckled as he scratched his head. He seemed a little embarrassed.

"I'm mighty obliged. I'll have to answer to his trust."

Then, he stooped down a little.

He looked around again to make sure no one was around and said,

"back to what we were talking about before, but have you told him how you feel yet?"

Shelfa's mood dropped like bricks.

She lowered her gaze and said,

".....yes. But, he said that he wasn't able to give me a reply yet."

"Oh, that's——"

"Oh, but it's all right. Rain has his own circumstances.....so it was only natural

that he replied that way. Though, I can't tell you what those circumstances are. But that's why I'm not worried at all. And——"

Shelfa, who had been explaining herself rapidly to a very confused Gazaram, quieted down at the end of her spiel. She was somewhat embarrassed to say the rest out loud.

After a brief moment, Gazaram kindly asked, "and.....is there more?"

She couldn't just end the conversation there, so Shelfa gathered up her courage and continued.

"And, I think it's wrong for your feelings to be influenced by someone else's."

She gently placed her hand on her chest and continued,

"no matter how Rain feels, my feelings for him won't change. I mean.....I'd be over the moon if he came to love me as well."

But, she said in a stronger voice as she lifted her head back up again,

"I'm okay with the way things are for now. I'm more than happy enough just to be by Rain's side."

"I see. ——I understand."

Gazaram cracked a smile and bowed lightly as Shelfa overcame her embarrassment with all her might to convey her feelings.

"I understand very well. Thank you for telling me something nice. I don't know what his circumstances are, but I, for one, will be cheering for you, Your Highness. It'd be nice if your feelings got through to him one day."

".....Thank you."

Shelfa held back her tears and beamed.

In response, Gazaram smiled back at her with everything he had.....

I'll be out on a long ride to take the time to think on a few things..... Ralphus

had said, meaning that he was likely heading for the stables.

He was finally free for once today, so he probably wouldn't be back for a while.

Rain had wanted to go with him, but unfortunately, he had already promised to spend time with someone else today.

I guess it's about time, he thought as he idly walked toward the backyard where he saw Selphie and Yuri chatting together as they left the lodgings.

From a distance, he saw Selphie talking bashfully as Yuri cheered her on with rough words.

"Yo."

When he lightheartedly called out to them as they grew closer, he was met with an:

".....oh."

Selphie quickly and dramatically turned bright red for some reason the moment she laid her eyes on him. Flustered, she moved her right fist to her left shoulder in Sunkwoll's unique salute. Her movements were jerky and extremely unnatural. It was as if she was a marionette.

Yuri, who was standing next to her, saluted like her friend had in a routine manner but was grinning as she watched Selphie's panic in amusement.

Well, I guess it isn't strange for girls their age to laugh at just about anything.

"You two are pretty lively today; were you exchanging jokes or something?"

Rain took it upon himself to bring up the matter.

As he expected, Yuri said,

"hahaha. Nothing'll happen if you keep hesitating, so why don't you take this chance right now and go for the kill and just con——"

"Waaaaah, waaaaaaaah!?"

What is she saying?!

was written all over Selphie's face as she froze up for a brief moment before

making a strange noise and waving her hands around in the air. She was on the verge of tears.

“.....The hell are you doing, Selphie? Did you eat something bad or something? And Yuri. I couldn’t hear you. Go for the kill and just con.....?”

“It’s nothing!”

Selphie interjected again. She continued,

“just considering how a decisive battle is coming up soon, oor something like that.....ahahahaha!”

She played with her well-maintained black wavy hair as she spoke.

.....Without meeting Rain’s eyes.

Not that I really care, but her words and the context just now don’t quite add up.

Still, Rain didn’t have any particular intention to pry so he didn’t make a fuss about it. He promptly began walking again.

“Well, I’m glad you two are having fun. Later.”

“Oh, um!”

What’s up? When he turned around because Selphie had called out to him, she looked shocked and put her hands on her mouth and immediately looked down.

“No.....welll...”

“C’mon! Strike while the iron’s hot! There’s no time like now! You already called out to him, so keep up your momentum and boom! Tell him!”

Yuri stirred Selphie on as her nostrils flared. Rain was the only one present who had no idea what was going on.

“What, do you need another advance payment? I don’t mind lending you some money if you need it. And it’s not like I’m gonna tell you to pay it back with your body or anything, so relax.”

“No, that’s not it! I’ve hardly used the money you gave me before. I just——”

You just what? When Rain tilted his head, Selphie obviously pushed herself and looked directly at Rain with such intensity that you would have thought that she was getting vengeance for her parents' deaths.

"My late father once said to me. That I have to speak up properly in times like this."

".....What?"

"I——"

Selphie's face, which was blushing red to begin with, grew even redder. She looked like she was trying to say something, but the words would not come out. Her lips quivered, her double-lidded eyes moistened with tears, and finally, she covered her face and crouched down where she stood.

"Aieeee! I can't. If it was something I could just say whenever, I wouldn't be having so much trouble!"

Selphie exploded in some emotion that Rain could not comprehend and muttered, "I can't, I just can't" to herself repeatedly.

Yuri pat her friend's back and consoled her before shooting Rain a look that clearly indicated that he was at fault.

Or rather, she put her reproach into words as well.

"This is your fault, General! You made her cry!"

How is this my fault? Rain thought.

Still, however, it wasn't as if he didn't have any idea why Selphie was acting the way she was. He had heard a little about her from Gunther.

"By any chance, is this about how you got depressed after killing for the first time? I don't know if this'll help or not, but I promised to teach the Princess some sword skills. Wanna come along, Selphie?"

The two girls suddenly looked exhausted despite his kind offer. Yuri, in particular, looked at him as if she was saying, "is he stupid?"

"You don't have to come if you don't want to."

Thoroughly put out, Rain began to walk away again.

Then, Selphie stood up and said,

“can you teach me too?”

“Did you change your mind?”

“Yes.....”

“Hmm. Yeah, sure. C’mon along.”

“Yes!”

Her mood had done a complete turn as she nodded in high spirits.

A shrill voice called out this time right as they had settled the matter and were about to head out.

“General!”

The blonde Senoa had caught sight of Rain and was making a beeline in his direction.

“Man, I’m really bumping into a lot of people today. What, are you here to complain about something again?”

“What is that supposed to mean? I simple came over to say hello because I saw you, have I not?”

she replied sullenly, and her tone took a sharper turn as she eyed Selphie and Yuri and said, “.....is something about to start?”

“Hey. Why do sound so suspicious right from the get go? It’s nothing that you suspect. I just promised to teach the Princess some sword skills today.”

Despite his honesty, Senoa didn’t seem to buy his explanation.

A harsh light lit in her narrowed blue eyes and she glared piercingly.

“Then, why are *they* here?”

“I happened to bump into them, and they ended up tagging along. We’re heading for the backyard.”

Senoa’s mood became even worse upon hearing that.

“You called out to them, but you neglected to call out to me, your direct subordinate and aide —what is the meaning of this?!”

Thoroughly annoyed, Rain replied,

“then you come along too. Is that better?”

“Yes, I shall. You’ve never accompanied me in training before. How could I ever let this chance slip by?!”

Despite the anger suggested in her words, there was a hint of happiness mixed into her voice.

Rain didn’t know why she was happy and simply assumed that it was because she was happy with anything that had to do with fighting.

“Well, I guess I should be happy there’ll be more women around,” Rain sighed.

When they circled around the main building of the castle and arrived at a little plaza near the rear gates, they found that Shelfa and Gazaram had already been waiting for Rain and were rather deep in avid conversation.

I see, so she’s finally warmed up to that old man. Yep, that’s great, I’m glad for them— Rain thought until he frowned upon hearing the contents of their conversation.

“And then, I made a feint and kicked the table over, and his reaction was as magnificent as they come! He jumped right on the table and kicked off the ceiling before attacking me!”

Gazaram spat in his enthusiasm.

He was so into his speech that he was like one of the old men who called people over to circus shows.

He was excited to the point that it was unbecoming of his age. Rain couldn’t see Shelfa’s face because she was turned away from him, but she hardly moved at all as she looked up at Gazaram.

The old knight’s fervent spiel continued passionately,

“I’ve seen a lot of strong enemies in my days, but I’ve never seen anyone react as spectacularly or have such splendid swordplay as him. And then, he pulled

out another terrifyingly awesome move, and—!?”

“Hey hey hey!”

Rain approached Gazaram with long strides as the latter continued his harangue with exaggerated gesturing. Rain continued, “quit talking about stuff that happened ages ago! You’re boring the Princess with all that boring talk!”

“Oh, why hello there.”

Gazaram did not look the slightest bit perturbed as he turned to Rain and flashed a grin. He continued, “but, Her Highness seems pretty interested in it.”

Rain pouted and looked to Shelfa only to realized that, as Gazaram had suggested, her cheeks were flushed red as she lost herself in Gazaram’s story. Her hands were clenched in little fists and she actually gulped in anticipation.

She was usually the first person to notice him, but she was so immersed in the tale that she hadn’t seen Rain approaching. *That’s fine and dandy and all, but is she actually wearing my coat? I said she could just for the heck of it, but I didn’t think she’d actually wear it.*

Shelfa finally cried out, “Rain!” in her usual cheery voice and greeted him as Rain smiled wryly.

However, she then looked behind him and tilted her head in confusion. She continued,

“um, these people are.....?”

“Yes. I just happened to bump into them. Well, you can just consider them as add-alongs and just ignore them. There’s a loud one here too, but just think of her as a festival bell or drum or something.”

“I don’t mind but.....um, are all of them joining us?”

——He already knew.

He had long since noticed their presence.

When Rain turned around, thoroughly fed up, he saw that a crowd of squires

and knights had assembled at a distance, on top of Selphie, Yuri, and Senoa, whom Rain had picked up initially. There were easily several dozen people present. It needn't be said that most of them were men.

Evidently, they had seen Rain leading the group of beautiful women and those who weren't busy at the moment had decided to creep along.

They were like ants being drawn to honey.

Evidently, there are too many people in this castle with too much time on their hands,

Rain reflected privately.

"Hey, you lot! This isn't some kind of show!"

The crowd drew back slightly when he rebuked them but did not disperse. Then, a familiar babyish face stepped out from the crowd. Even Rain remembered his name by now —it was Miran from the other day.

"Um..... I happened to overhear you when we passed by, but I heard that you were teaching sword skills? I won't intrude, so could I please observe from up close? Even if it'd be asking too much for you to train me personally, I'd like to watch you teach so I can use the experience as a reference."

".....Hmm. Well, if you want to see my skills that much, I won't say no."

Rain immediately caved.

He knew that Miran hadn't said what he had just to curry favor.

He knew that Miran was being plainly serious by looking at the waves he emitted. Admirable sorts like Miran were hard to come by.

"——But that's just me. Is it alright, Princess?"

"Eh, umm....."

She was a little anxious, but Shelfa was understanding. Though, it was admittedly difficult to refuse at this point.

It'd be good for her to get a little more used to people,

Rain thought as he pushed the notion through. That being said, what Miran had said had also improved his mood considerably.

In any case, the rest of the crowd immediately drew closer and formed a circle the moment that Shelfa gave her approval.

“No.....I only meant to give permission to Miran.....well, whatever.”

Shelfa was a liege lord after all. She needed to get used to being in front of people.

And so, Rain decided not to refuse them. If Shelfa really wasn't comfortable with the idea, he could always kick them out again.

“Alright, shall we start then?”

Shelfa took off the coat in a hurry when Rain announced that training had started. She was left in only the sleeveless white shirt and white shorts that left her skinny legs out in the open.

The spectators stirred up a fuss when they saw her new getup. Rain shot a glare at them before they crept closer all at once.

He had been able to deter them from rushing forward, but the commotion hadn't fully died down. There were even some among the crowd who earnestly whispered, “I'm so glad I'm alive!” and embraced the colleague next to them.

Others were so emotionally moved that they offered a prayer to the Goddess Myusra, leaving Rain feeling suddenly drained.

Geez..... Why the hell are you thanking a goddess of war for fulfilling your lecherous needs!?

“Quiet down! If you can't observe in silence, I'll personally kick you out of here!”

None of his men doubted that Rain would actually do as he threatened.

The ruckus died down at once after Rain's half-serious yell.

After a sigh, Rain turned to the four girls again. No one could blame that all of the girls, standing in a circle, either furrowed their brows or looked embarrassed.

Shelfa, in particular, was quivering from the dual effects of nervousness and the cold. Her outfit was undoubtedly easy to move in, but it was mid-winter. It

was much to thin for the weather.

She's a terrifyingly obedient child, so I probably should have specified more suitable clothing for her.

Shelfa looked at Rain with imploring eyes as he walked up briskly to her.

".....Rain."

"It's okay. I'll warm you up right now,"

he whispered gently and gathered light in his right hand. He placed it on top of her head and poured magic into her.

His eyes met Shelfa's bewildered ones when he quietly drew back his hand.

"My body feels pleasantly warm....."

"Well, there are many ways to put magic to use,"

Rain said with his normal tone of voice and returned to where he had originally been standing with a smile.

Selphie and the other girls pierced him with envious gazes.

"Gen~er~al! I'm cold tooo!"

Yuri shot her hand up in the air.

"You guys aren't wearing light clothing! Geez, one of you is even wearing a long skirt, you just don't get it at all."

He glared poignantly at Senoa (with her long skirt) and spat out, "tough it out!"

"Whaa, isn't that playing favorites?!"

"Obviously, since I'm not an impartial guy. Anyway, let's begin. Draw your sword and take your stance!"

Yuri, who still seemed to want to grumble, was overwhelmed and slowly unsheathed her sword, but even then, she sulkily complained, ".....but you haven't even prepared us wooden swords or anything. I don't care if you get hurt because we're using real blades."

"Hahaha!"

Rain laughed while pointing at Yuri.

“Hey, that’s the best joke I’ve heard these past couple of years. Do you really think that you’d have a one in a hundred-million chance of hitting me even when you’re about to cry in desperation?”

“Uh, urgk..... Well, yeah, I might not have a chance. But I saw you! When you were fighting Joe, General, I was secretly watching from the shadows of a nearby store!”

Yuri said, proud of something completely unrelated for some reason.

If you had the time to watch the fight, then you should’ve helped guard the Little one!

Rain became petulant.

“So what?”

“Wasn’t it a pretty difficult fight?”

“Your eyes are basically made out of glass, I see. Just where the hell were you even looking?!”

Rain shook his head as if he was lamenting over something that couldn’t be helped. He even sighed and frowned. He continued, “are you an amateur too? In another five seconds, he would’ve been rolling by my feet lamenting the full extent of his recklessness while crying on his journey to Hades. Right, Princess?”

He suddenly turned toward Shelfa.

Shelfa, who had been grinning because of how warm she was, energetically replied, “yes, I think Rain was about to win even now,” without hesitation.

By pure chance, everybody watching them thought in tandem,

‘I can’t trust what she’s saying about this one.....’

Yuri, who looked the most doubtful out of the lot, still tried to pick a quarrel.

“— I’m pretty sure that you said, “in another minute,” or something along

those lines back then.”

“You there!”

Unable to argue, Rain pointed sharply at Yuri again. He continued,

“stay silent before your teacher. Hurry up and take your stance!”

Yuri obeyed this time.

She still looked visibly discontent.

We can finally start..... Rain thought as he gazed at his impromptu students.

From right to left, they were Senoa, Yuri, Selphie, and Shelfa.

Among them, the only one who instantly took a proper stance was Selphie. She took a stance where her sword was aimed at her opponent’s eyes (mid-stance) and her form was rather good.

As for the rest——

Shelfa looked at Selphie beside her and copied the latter’s motions with unsteady hands, while Yuri’s sword dropped languidly in a low stance.

Senoa, for whatever reason, had raised her sword above her head in an extremely high stance.

.....While looking extraordinarily happy as she did.

She was the worst among them all.

“Hm~m..... A little late, but I want each of you to keep your stance and tell me a bit about your history with the sword.”

Senoa opened her mouth first.

“Ahem. Despite my appearances, I——”

Rain pointed to the next person in line.

“Kay, next.”

“Wh, why are you skipping mee?!”

“Cause there’s no point to listening to your history. Alright, next!”

Yuri and the other girls looked to one another.

“I started when I was about ten, I think..... I picked up things here and there and developed my own style.”

“I, I started learning from my father when I was five.”

“.....Today’s my first day.”

“I see. That sounds about right.”

Rain let out a large sigh and continued in a solemn tone,

“listen up. I’ll start off by saying something contradictory, but the smartest thing to do is to not fight. The most correct way to handle any situation is to avoid fighting right from the start. It’s really not something to be proud of if you find yourself in a situation where you absolutely have to draw your sword.”

Silence fell upon the area as if it was a graveyard at night.

No one had thought even in their wildest dreams that Rain of all people would say something like this.

Yuri even prattled, “you aren’t convincing anyone,” immediately in a small voice.

Rain ignored her remark and continued indifferently,

“but that’s not the case if you find yourself in an unlucky situation where you have to fight no matter what. I don’t want any of you to get this wrong, but in a nutshell, sword skills are basically just “the most efficient way to cut a person down.” That’s what it boils down to. Forget about looking good or anything else at that point. Once you’re facing an opponent with your sword drawn, it’s best to think that the match won’t be over until one of you defeats the other.”

He looked to Selphie as he spoke for some reason or another.

Under his gaze, Selphie furrowed her brows and grimaced.

I understand, but..... was likely what she was thinking.

Fear wasn’t easy to shake off once it took hold. Cutting someone down naturally also meant killing them. It was the first stumbling block for the weak-willed and the kind. As for whether they could overcome that block or not..... was up to the individual.

It was only possible if they had some sort of strong motive or deep conviction.....or if they simply waited until their hearts grew numb.

Gazaram, who was sitting down at the edges of Rain's vision, nodded with his eyes closed. Then, he too looked to Selphie.

It looked like the old man had noticed as well.

"That aside. Except for Selphie, the rest of you have horrible stances. Well, Yuri's looks somewhat similar to mine....."

First, Rain circled around Senoa and propped up her sword hand from behind.

Envious voices arose yet again from the crowd surrounding them.

"Eep! Wha, what are you doing?!"

"What do you mean, "eep?" I'm fixing your stance. Hold still."

Hold your arms like this, your legs like this, he taught her one by one.

Senoa was surprisingly obedient, but she still asked him a question as if she had suddenly thought up of it on the spot.And in a very quiet voice.

"But, General. Don't you hold your sword in a high stance yourself from time to time?"

Rain flatly replied,

"geniuses don't make for good reference, so there's no point in copying me. Someone at my level can take whatever stance they want to."

Still.....you've been watching me pretty well, huh? he added.

Senoa fell into silence for some reason. Her face grew redder by the moment.

Rain corrected his reticent aide's stance so that it was proper and simply told Yuri, standing next to her, "your abilities are mediocre too, so don't slack off and take a middle stance!" over his shoulder.

Just as he was about to head over to Shelfa, Selphie timidly said,

"um..... Is my stance not strange?"

"Not really. Besides, when I say 'stance,' I'm good with anything as long as you can move readily. I've no complaints against yours. After that, there's only

the problem with your feelings.”

“Erm.....even if you say that...”

“Listen up.”

Rain placed a hand on Selphie’s shoulder and stared deep into her light green eyes. Then, he whispered into her ear, “this is only for your ears. A long time ago, I threw up after killing someone too. So, it’s nothing for you to be ashamed of. Everyone’s the same. It’s rarer to find someone who’s okay after killing.”

“Y, you did, Lord Rain.....?”

“Yeah.”

Rain nodded, told her to keep it a secret, and made sure to emphasize his point with his eyes as she looked back at him in complete surprise. He continued, “but never forget that if you ever hesitate, it creates a possibility that someone else will die. Try remembering that if you ever find yourself in a situation where you have to kill or be killed.”

He gently pat Selphie’s dainty shoulder and moved away from her.

Selphie.....lowered her head just a little.

“——Now then.”

Rain circled behind Shelfa and corrected her stance. She let out a small exclamation of surprise every time he touched her. He did not take a stern tone with her. Rather, it was the exact opposite.

Shelfa’s shoulders, slenderer than even Selphie’s, quivered just a little.

“Are you still cold?”

“N, no!”

She shook her head vigorously.

Her straight blonde hair, free of even the slightest curls, spread out behind her and gave off a pleasant fragrance.

Still, it wasn’t the greatest time for her to be so openly obvious about her feelings.

In a hurry, Rain said,

“like I said before, there’s no point in being so caught up in your stance. It’s fine as long as you can move readily and swing your sword from whatever stance you’re holding. And, please look at your opponent’s eyes, not the tip of their sword. If you focus too much on just their sword, you might accidentally slip up. There’s no telling what kind of surprise attacks are waiting in store for you.....like short blades, fists, hidden weapons, kicks, or the like.

“But, if you’re looking at your opponent, you’ll definitely be able to see a hint of how they’re about to move next. Maybe I should call it their presence? Actually, it’s fastest to naturally be able to read their presences or feel out their Ekseed.....in other words, their “Ki,” to anticipate their next move, but let’s save that for another time.”

“Y, yes!”

Rain smiled at Shelfa’s energetic answer.

He finished his explanation and returned to where he had originally been standing.

Then, he suddenly thrust a finger at Selphie’s direction.

“Alright. I’m gonna attack you now for demonstration. I want everyone else to carefully watch how she moves into a defensive position.”

“Eh, eh hh!?”

Selphie opened her eyes wide and pointed at herself. She continued,

“m, me?!”

“Well, you’re the best among the members here.”

“What now!?”

“Eh~, reeally?”

It was not Selphie who had exclaimed this time.

It was Senoa and Yuri.

Both of them had thought that they were the best among the four girls.

Yuri aside, Rain thought that Senoa was being much too brazen. Who did she think she was, saying, “what now!?” and all that?

“Shut it! So, you ready, Selphie?”

“P, please go easy on me.....”

Selphie nodded stressfully as sweat drops formed on her.

Rain picked up a pebble by his feet and said,

“alright. I’m gonna come at you with great vigor as soon as this pebble hits the ground.”

“Eh?! I, I’m not ready yet..... And with great vigor too.....”

“Like I care about that. Your enemies aren’t going to wait for you to get ready, no matter what your situation is!”

He threw up the pebble before Selphie could reply. Calmly, he waited for it to hit the ground.

Selphie, on the other hand, gulped.

Then, the very moment the pebble hit the ground.

Rain charged, leaving only an afterimage of his black hair before the spectators’ eyes.

He closed the gap of several meters between them in an instant and a breeze grazed the spectators’ cheeks a slight moment later.

They only knew that Rain had moved by the slight scrapping of his sheathe when he drew his sword and the small, but unique, sound of the magic sword a moment after because they could not see that moment he had moved in their vision.

Swish!

Bzzzzzzzzt

“.....Eek!”

Selphie was troubled as she tried to raise her sword. She had somehow seen the magic sword come down above her head, but the shining blue blade had unfortunately already stopped just short of lopping off her head. There was only less than a millimeter’s worth of space between the magic sword and her skin.

If Rain hadn’t stopped his magic sword, her head would have plopped right to the ground.

“Hey.”

Rain peered into Selphie’s face from up close and scowled.

“I’ll look over the fact that you moved contrary to my expectations. But if you’re gonna defend yourself, you have to bring up your sword high enough that you can guard properly. Why the hell are you hesitating after raising your sword a few centimeters!?”

“B, but! You were too fast~. I didn’t dare take my eyes off of you because I thought I could get you this time, but I only saw your afterimage!”

“It looks like you have some trouble with your dynamic vision and reflexes.”

Rain re-sheathed his sword after saying something unreasonable as if it was nothing.

Then, he grabbed Selphie’s arm in a hurry as her knees were about to give out.

“Hey, quit doing the same thing every time. Your panties will be out for everyone to see with how short your skirt is.Oh, I see. It’s actually better that way, yeah?”

She hurried out of his grasp.

“Kyah!”

Selphie faltered but remained on her feet after stumbling a few steps forward.

“.....Tch.”

“General!”

Yuri carped as soon as Rain clicked his tongue.

“Yeah~, I get it, I get it. I’ll take this seriously.”

Rain waved his hand and went back to where he had originally been standing. He continued, “so, were you able to get anything out of that demo?”

All four girls shook their heads in unison.

“Hmph..... The reason that you think I’m fast isn’t just because of my speed, you know. It’s because I don’t make any unnecessary movements. Anyone will seem a little faster if they cut out any and all unnecessary movements from when they first step in to when they draw their sword.”

After he finished explaining, Rain attacked Selphie again, slowly, and let her stop his sword this time.

He looked over everyone, including those in the crowd around them, once he was done. Everyone had a complicated look on their face, as if they couldn’t decide whether they understood Rain’s lesson or not. Among them, Shelfa, Selphie, and among the spectators, Miran, had drawn their swords and were imitating Rain’s movements.

The three of them truly were diligent.

“Princess.”

“Yes?”

“It’s your turn this time. It’s okay if you just copy what I did, so please come and attack me.”

“Y, yes!”

Shelfa promptly looked nervous again as she readied her sword.Her movements were stiff.

“Oh, wait. Please take a few deep breaths first. Look me in the eyes, breathe in, and breathe out.Like that.One more time.”

Just as she was told, Shelfa kept her eyes locked on Rain and took multiple

deep breaths. Eventually, the stiffness left her body.

She bobbed her head up and down when Rain asked her if she'd calmed down.

"Then please start. But come at me like I'm really your enemy, like you really mean to defeat me, and not just as practice. Concentrate, and if you will."

It might have been because the spectators were watching over them silently. Shelfa nodded again in a relaxed manner as she kept her gaze fixated on Rain.

It looked like everyone else had temporarily vanished from her view as she stared directly at Rain, likely because of how obedient she was.

Rain braced himself a little for the first time today.

If Shelfa truly had some sort of talent hidden within her, then now was the time that it would be brought out into the light.

Talent wasn't something you could grasp or touch, but a glimpse of it would surely surface if it was there. Even if she was a complete beginner.

Did that somehow pleasant pressure really originate from Shelfa's talent as he'd expected, or— Shelfa broke out into a run.

She wasn't all that fast, but her form wasn't half bad.

She ran fervently with her legs, as white as fresh snow, as her radiant blonde hair spread out behind her.

She ran up to Rain at once.

She swung her sword while making as little unnecessary movements as she could, just as Rain had said to. This was probably as fast as she could run. She didn't hold back, likely because she didn't think that her attack would ever reach Rain even in her wildest dreams.

Shelfa acknowledged Rain's abilities more than anyone else in the world. Her trust in him bordered religious faith.

—That was probably why.

She moved with everything she had *because* she knew how strong her

opponent was; because she had understood that there was no way that her sword would ever reach him. Her form was sharp too.

But.....this.....

It had likely been because he had been looking over her quizzically.

Shelfa's sword was already over Rain's head by the time he regained his senses.

Still, Rain didn't panic. He always waited until the last moment possible before evading his opponents' attacks anyway.

He moved just before the attack hit and off-handedly drew his magic sword and placed its blade against Shelfa's neck as she fumbled after losing sight of her mark.

It was likely that, from Shelfa's point of view, her opponent had suddenly vanished and blade had been pressed up against her vitals before she even realized it.

This had evidently been the case.

A refreshingly honest look of surprise ran across her beautiful looks before she smiled the next moment, impressed that the match has already been decided.

Then, she spoke with a hint of respect under her ragged breathing as she said, "you truly are amazing, Rain! I thought that you had disappeared just now!"

Then, she tilted her head to the side in doubt and added,

"um..... Is something the matter? Did I do something wrong?"

"Oh, uh. No, it's nothing,"

Rain glossed over in a hurry.

He smiled as if nothing had happened and continued,

".....you have some talent. You'll be able to get to a pretty high level, depending on your training."

"Is that so?!"

She laughed in relief. She continued,

“I’ll do my best to train hard under your care, Rain!”

“But, don’t rulers usually only learn just enough to keep up appearances? If it ever gets to the point where you have to take up the sword personally, Princess, that means that the battle is as good as lost. Please keep your hard work to an extent that won’t ruin your hands.”

Even as he glibly replied, Rain thought to himself,

I’m certain now. There’s no mistaking it. As I’d thought, the thing I’m feeling from this child is— —

“You would do well to remember.”

A voice suddenly reverberated in his head.

He recalled words that he had heard long ago, so long ago that they were already fading from the rustiest corners of his memories. He hadn’t ever thought of them until now.

Right..... If I remember correctly, I was stopped by a fortuneteller after that incident with that dear old man.

They were the words that the old fortuneteller had said to them back then.

Why am I remembering this now, after all this time, as if this was timed on purpose.....?

The words, newly revived, echoed vividly in his mind as if he had returned to that day almost ten years ago to hear them again.

“You would do well to remember. In the future, you will be faced with a fated choice. You will face this without fail. One, is an easy, peaceful path. And the other— —”

“General!”

This time, he heard a voice not from his memories but from reality.

Rain shook his head and stopped reminiscing. *That's already in the past. So what about it? Besides, I already had my answer even then. My answer still remains the same, regardless of fate or what have you.*

He completely switched gears and looked to the direction the voice was calling from.

Leni was jogging closer, pushing his way through the crowd as he did.

“What’s up? Is it already time to eat?”

“Why would I call you over for every little meal, General?! This isn’t the time to be saying such carefree things! Just now, one of my men whom I had posted on the road came in con, contact with me!”

“Calm down, idiot! What, did someone from Safir’s party attack us or something?”

Rain had said this as a joke, but Leni responded with a pallid face (he was already scared).

“That really just might be the case this time.”

Rain and Shelfa reflexively exchanged looks.

Part 2

His workload had unexpectedly increased at once.

He ended the training session early because they no longer had the time for it today and ordered for the castle gates to be closed for war preparations.

Ralphus hadn't returned yet.

He was the kind of man who wouldn't come back for a while once he went out on a long ride, so he probably wouldn't be back for while yet. It was his first break in a long time, too.

Rain had sent out a messenger, but he didn't know if the messenger would be able to find Ralphus, so he had no choice but to do the bulk of the work himself.

Rain gathered his comrades in the reception hall to hear Leni's report for the time being. That being said, everyone present was one of Rain's subordinates. Unfortunately, Nigel and Gwen had taken some of the soldiers out for untimely training exercises. Rain had sent them a messenger as well, but it would still take some time before they returned.

Rain, who had secured a place by Shelfa's side as she sat at the head of a large rectangular table, asked, "you said that a guard saw the enemy approaching closer. What were their numbers like?"

With an ashen face, Leni replied,

"a, a few hundred, according to what I heard."

"——What? That few?! What was the enemy unit's formation like? Who was their commander? I didn't hear anything from my spies."

Rain silently clicked his tongue as he asked question after question. Currently, his secret intelligence activities were focused under the assumptions that they would be at war again with Zarmine soon. He didn't have the personnel to spare, so he couldn't help but place intelligence on other countries or on Sunkwoll's internal workings on the back burner.

And, while Rain wouldn't go as far as to say that he was taking them lightly, he did not regard the Sunkwoll nobles as highly as he did Zarmine. He had planted a few spies around Safir, but that was about it.

To get straight to the point, Rain thought that "there wasn't enough time to care about ancient relics from the past!" For Rain, Zarmine's movements were much more important on the grand scale of things.

Still.

Something had to have happened internally for this to happen now. Maybe I should discuss this with Gunther and revise our policy.....

"That's..."

Leni replied again,

"we still don't know who the commander is, but there was something strange about them."

"Strange?"

"According to the reports we received from the fast horses, all of the soldiers were dressed up in excessively decorated clothing. On top of that, there was a pure white carriage surrounded by a number of upper-ranked knights. They appeared to be escorting the carriage as they marched."

"A pure white carriage?"

Right as Rain snorted, exasperated—

"Impossible!"

Senoa stood up with such force that her seat fell over. Before anyone could ask her what was wrong, she pressed in against Leni, who was seated opposite to her. Then, face twitching, she screamed, "whashunt there a family crest on that carriage?!"

"Whoa, you surprised me. Err, I think I got what you mean. There was a red, rose-like crest around the carriage doors, or something like that..... But, is something wrong, Miss Senoa? You've gone awfully pale all of a sudden."

Senoa ignored Leni's questioning looks. Instead, she whispered, "oh no," and

staggered backward. After a few steps, she stumbled on thin air and fell to the floor.

She fell over backwards, as if she had been planning on rolling back, and slammed her head. She clutched her head in her hands as she writhed in pain on the floor.

“O, ow, that hurts!”

“.....Hey. That gag wasn’t funny at all. At least wear a shorter skirt and provide us some fan service like Selphie does.”

“Ehh?”

“I, I don’t do it to provide fan service. Oh, but.....if it’s you, Lord Rain...” said Selphie, who was standing next to Yuri who, in turn, was seated like it was only natural for some reason.

Her quiet voice was drowned out by Senoa’s angry roars.

“Why are you sprouting such ridiculous nonsense?! Why haven’t you asked me if I was all right before you said that vulgar garbage?!”

“.....You okay?”

“That sounded forced!”

On the verge of tears (apparently it had hurt quite a lot), Senoa lost herself in indignation and stomped her feet not once, but twice. She continued, “besides, shouldn’t you know who we’re dealing with after hearing about the crest of the crimson rose since you’re a high general of this kingdom?”

Senoa, who was alone in her budding excitement, looked to both Rain and Leni.

“Hey, Leni. Do *you* know?”

“Nope. I haven’t the foggiest idea.”

“Um, Rain?”

Shelfa interrupted hesitantly.

“Oh, do you know what she’s talking about, Princess?”

“I’ve never met the head of the family. But, I believe that the red rose is the family crest of the Hartoul’s, of the Five Great Houses.”

“It is exactly as you say,”

said Senoa in a loud voice. She continued,

“it’s Elena Felicia Hartoul! The arrogant and disagreeable girl who always speaks like she’s looking down on you and the acting head of house Hartoul!”

“What?”

Rain was surprised for the first time during their discussion.

Actually, it had been the first time he was surprised to this extent in a while.

Then, with a hint of awe in his voice, he looked to Senoa, who was looking smug and satisfied with his response, and said, “to think that *you* of all people would call her an “arrogant girl”……. This Elena of ours must be quite the character. ……I’m honestly amazed!”

“Wha, what do you mean by that?!”

Senoa’s shrill voice echoed in the reception hall so loudly that people wanted to tell her that she didn’t need to shout so much.

Rain even covered his ears and said,

“quit wailing. I didn’t mean anything bad by it.”

“What do you mean you didn’t mean anything bad?!”

“Ugh, just shut up for a bit. How old is this Elena?”

“I believe she’s eighteen, but what of it?”

“……She’s young.”

Rain felt that a lot of the family heads among the pure-blooded Sunkwoll nobility, including Senoa, were much too young. When he had asked Ralphus about it before, Ralphus had said that, “naturally, there are many elders among the nobility, but family heads aren’t allowed to continue governing their families past their forties unless they have extenuating circumstances.”

Rain thought that it wasn’t a bad custom to leave things to the younger

generations, but he still thought that eighteen was much too young. Perhaps they did this because, despite their long lifespans, many nobles died early of illness.

That being said, there were still enough of those sickly nobles around to be a headache.

“The actual head of the Hartoul house is someone else,”

said Senoa sullenly, her feelings hurt. She continued,

“it’s her father. He’s currently ill, however.”

“.....Him too, huh. Well, whatever. If I’m gonna have to meet one of them, I’d rather meet this Elena rather than a dirty old man.”

“You only say that because you’ve never met Elena before, General.”

“I’ll look forward to it then. I welcome all beauties with open arms.”

“Whaat?”

Selphie and Shelfa looked startled as he looked up.

“.....Why are you so surprised? Isn’t it obviously it’s nicer to see a beauty than an old man?”

Rain said to Shelfa before looking to Selphie, who had cast her gaze back down in a hurry.

Why is she surprised too?

“That aside!”

Senoa said as she banged on the table.

Incidentally, she was still standing.

“What will we do? I’m not certain we should allow someone like Elena into the castle just because she happens to be acquainted with Sir Ralphus.”

“What?”

Rain cut in and asked in a hurry. He continued,

“wait a minute. She’s acquainted with Ralphus? How close are they?”

“Didn’t you know?”

Senoa asked with a wry countenance. She continued,

“Elena is.....well.....in love with Sir Ralphus. Apparently, she once held a..... marriage interview with him with his father’s full support.”

“Marriage!? Hey, wait a sec. So what did Ralphus say?”

This was the first time that Rain had heard of this.

Or, at the very least, Rain had never heard anything about it from the Ralphus.

How cold of him.

As Rain pouted, Senoa panicked a little and said,

“that’s not it. From what I’ve heard, this is all apparently Elena’s one-sided considerations.”

“Huh.....”

Rain found it difficult to respond to the situation.

But then, Rain realized something unpleasant as he nodded ambiguously and brushed back his hair.

“Hey, wait. Doesn’t that mean that she’s not coming here to attack us?”

“That’s correct,”

Senoa nodded reluctantly. She continued,

“Elena is likely on her way to provided us with reinforcements that we never even asked for.”

——*We don’t need you, so go home,*

Rain thought to himself on reflex.

After all, with a few exceptions, all pure-blooded nobles were a bunch of flops.

The afternoon passed away leisurely and the sun was about to set soon.

The group that Leni's men had seen were finally coming into view.

Rain hurried up the ramparts as soon as he heard that they were approaching and looked to the direction that Senoa pointed him too.

A few knights on horseback had cleared the forest and were coming into view.

None of them were wearing old armor. Instead, their armor was ornamented with so much gold and silver that they refracted the sunlight so brightly that it was a nuisance to observe.

Even the attendants following after the knights were wearing high quality armaments. Just how rich would the master have to be for her servants to be dressed so nicely? She might have tens of millions of taran at her disposal. Actually, she might even have billions.

The line still continued.

The line of mounted knights stretched on and on as they exited the forest.

And then, Rain saw it.

It looked just like what Leni had described.

The carriage was stylish and even its wheels had been painted white. Surrounding it were several knights maintaining a strict posture of vigilance.

A gaudy rose was painted on the doors on either side of the carriage. A similar red rose was painted on the white flags carried proudly by upper-ranked

knights.

The Hartouls must have been some rather flashy people if *that* was their family crest. Rain really didn't want to become acquainted with them.

"I just remembered, but,"

Rain groaned,

"now that I think about it, one of the dead high generals may or may not have had that same insignia and the surname 'Hartoul'....."

"——You're really quite something if you seriously forgot that,"

said Senoa, looking as exasperated as her words suggested. She continued,

"I haven't met with him in person more than a few times. But——"

"Ugh, enough, I don't need it."

Rain interrupted her and waved her away with his hand. He continued,

"I don't care about male nobles, especially if they're already dead. He probably liked to pretend that I didn't exist anyhow. I know it's gonna sound bad, but I barely remember any of the high generals other than Ralphus. The only one I remember at the top of my head is at most Ganoa, because he was particularly annoying."

"That's problematic no matter how you go about it."

Rain ignored her and sharply raised his hand.

"Archers, at ready!"

The archers hurried into ready position and nocked their arrows. They were poised in a manner that would allow them to attack as soon as their enemy came into range.

"General! Elena is——"

"It doesn't matter who she is if she hasn't sent a runner yet. We'll attack if she comes closer without bothering to let us know she's here. ——No, wait..... Hold until further orders!"

Rain delayed his order to attack.

One knight broke off from formation and advanced before the rest of the group as they approached the plaza in front of the gates.

He approached the castle gates and, without bothering to unsaddle, loudly proclaimed:

“I come bearing the words of Lady Elena of house Hartoul, one of the glorious Five Great Houses!”

Before Rain allowed or disallowed him to continue speaking, he kept shouting,

“Under the discretion of Lady Elena Felicia Hartoul, the acting head of the household, we of house Hartoul have declared ourselves an ally to Lard Ralphus and the royal family of Sunkwoll under his care! I request that you open the gates at once!”

After listening to the messenger, who had stuck out his chest so far that he would have fallen over backward if he had stuck it out just a little further, Rain stiffly turned his head to look at Senoa.

“So, hey. I’m technically the lord of this castle, right? I’m starting to doubt that a bit after hearing that stupid proclamation.”

“I understand what you’re trying to say.”

Senoa looked sympathetic, for once. She continued,

“your name didn’t come up in that proclamation even once, General. Needless to say, it was likely intentional.”

“Well they’ve sure got guts. Barging into someone’s house and ignoring the homeowner, are they? Their behavior will end up getting them burned.”

Then, Leni came in from the side and interrupted Rain’s grumblings,

“so, what shall we do? The messenger is waiting for us. As are our archers.”

Rain turned around and ordered the archers to “fire at will!”

Or, at least, that’s what he’d wanted to do, but he just barely stopped himself.

He held back because Elena was Ralphus’ acquaintance. He owed Ralphus a lot from King Douglas’ days. Even if she was unpleasant to deal with, he couldn’t refuse her outright if she was Ralphus’ acquaintance.

If she hadn’t been, he would have chased her away immediately.

“.....Can’t be helped. From the looks of all this, she’s definitely a Sunkwoll noble and this probably isn’t a trap. Let them in.”

Senoa said,

“you say this now, but you’ll regret it later.”

“.....I regret it already, trust me,”

Rain replied with a sour look.

Elena had arrived.

She made her overtly effective entrance as they watched over the soldiers noisily crowding the gates.

The lavish carriage rolled gracefully into the courtyard and its door opened with a click.

On its steps appeared a scarlet dress.

There was a bold cut on the chest that allowed over half of Elena’s ample bosom to spill over, and the rest of the dress was covered in frills and lace. Her beautifully set hair was decorated with extravagant golden ornaments.

Elena’s blonde hair, more luxurious Safir’s, was done up in ringlets and she had a white feathered fan opened in her right hand.

She covered her bright red lips with the fan that covered half of her face and sonorously said,

“My my! What a shabby-looking castle.”

Everyone present, including Rain, were flabbergasted.

This was their first time meeting a woman as flamboyant and unreserved as her.

Completely unconcerned about their reactions, Elena continued,

“but still, I shall tolerate this castle and its countryside reek if Lord Ralphus is here..... Oh~, where art thou, my beloved Lord?!”

She stretched out a willowy hand to the heavens in a theatrical fashion. The bejeweled gold and silver rings on all five of her fingers shined blindingly.

Then, she looked to the sky in bitter affliction, as if she was some heroine in a tragic love story.

If she was doing this naturally without minding the gazes of the crowd around her, Rain figured that she must either be some kind of big-shot or an abysmal idiot.

Elena then twirled out of her pose and surveyed the area before finally resting her eyes on Senoa.

“My oh my. If it isn’t Senoa? I see you’re still alive, m’dear,”

she said with a scornful laugh. She continued,

“the previous head of house Estherhart retired from his position as high general, did he not? I was almost certain that the house had collapsed and you’d gone into hiding in some hole or another afterward~”

Elena looked up as Senoa replied with her cheeks reddening somewhat.

“Mind your own business! To think that I’d have to suffer to see you again. How truly unfortunate I must be!”

Elena responded by fanning herself with her white feathered fan, despite that it was winter, as if she was saying, *‘I shan’t dirty my ears with your lowly words.’* She was quite the character.

Senoa’s mood worsened, naturally, and she glared at Elena while biting her

lips.

Ignoring the stormy air between the two, Rain suddenly drew closer to Senoa and whispered, “hey. What’s with this ‘girl who likes to up the tension during the day so that she can make it explode later’? You really don’t know anyone decent, do you?”

“I just happen to know her, it’s not like we have any other kind of relationship between us!”

Senoa emphasized how preposterous the notion was as she whispered back her rebuttal. Elena had overheard their entire exchange even though they’d been whispering because both of them had naturally loud voices to begin with.

This time, Elena cut in with a moody tone.

“The two of you over there! I can hear you! And you, the black one. Isn’t your attitude too big for a mere commoner?! Just who do you think I am?!”

Rain simply looked back at Elena with his eyebrows raised as she wailed about noisily.

He stiffly turned to Senoa yet again and asked,

“.....the black one?”

“I believe that she’s probably referring to the color of your clothes, hair, and eyes, General,”

she replied in all seriousness.

“.....Right. That’s what I’d figured too.”

Rain shook his head and took a few steps toward Elena, grumbling, “look here, you.”

If Elena had been a man, Rain would have punched her right off the bat, but he didn’t really care enough to because she wasn’t, though he did think to at least give her a piece of his mind.

However, two giant men had appeared from behind the carriage and blocked his path.

Both giants were in regular clothes instead of armor and were truly sweaty-

looking men with bulging muscles. One was orthodoxly equipped with a sword and the other was armed with an iron rod that was as long as he was tall.

The one with the sword said,

“don’t get any closer to the Princess! You dirty commoner!”

—Tension ran through the air.

But it hadn’t come from Rain.

It had come from the castle soldiers, Rain’s regular comrades, and Shelfa, who gulped as they watched everything unfold.

Shelfa, in particular, had been looking at the two of them, troubled, up until just then but looked at them in disgust the moment she heard the man with the sword speak.

Or, you could also say that everyone gathered there had begun to hold clear animosity for Elena at that very moment.

As for Rain, Rain cast a sharp glance at the two men blocking his path and smiled complacently.

He opened his mouth to tease them a bit, but snapped his mouth shut instead.

He had done so because he had heard one of the spectators from Elena’s side say,

“is he seriously the High General? Hmm, I doubt that a mere commoner like him could possibly protect the royal family.”

Rain lost himself in fury at that very moment.

“.....What did you say?”

He ignored the two men in front of him and looked straight at the man who had just spoken out of turn.

“You bastard, what did you just say?!”

Gazaram, who had been standing near Shelfa, felt like ten years of his life had been shaved off all at once upon seeing the smile be wiped off of Rain's face.

Standing before him was the Rain whom he had first met a decade ago.

An endlessly cold and deathlessly still expression with clear black eyes. His eyes were as sharp as keenly honed blades as they pierced through all that came into their view.

There was, however, a few differences between the Rain in front of him and the Rain from the past.

Namely, the outrageous wave of power that seemed to exercise a death grip on even his very soul.....the pressure he had felt from Rain then couldn't even compare to what he was feeling now.

And Gazaram hadn't been able to reach Rain's feet even back then.

His surroundings filled with discomposure.

His allied knights looked at the goosebumps on their arms quizzically. Some even asked their neighbors, "hey, do you feel something tingling?"

Even the knights, who were ordinary people, had felt a fragment of that enormous power.

Gazaram gulped and thought to himself,

you're lucky that that's all you can perceive..... If you felt the full extent of this 'power' pressing down on your entire being, you wouldn't be able to make idle talk like that.

Gazaram saw Leni and Selphie staggering out of the corner of his eye, but he couldn't pay them any mind.

I should stop him, somehow.

Rain's low voice continued,

"you! A rotten noble who's only preyed upon the weak your entire life like you think you have any right to say that to *me*? I dare you to say it again —*what can I not protect!?*"

He glared and stepped his tall figure closer to his target. He hadn't been outwardly angry before, but his fury was clearly etched on his face now.

The man who had angered Rain opened his eyes so wide that they could have popped out and began trembling so hard that it was comical.

His teeth couldn't stop clattering before whatever it was that he saw in his eyes. All he could do was tremble as the blood drained from his face.

The face he had been making as he taunted Rain had vanished without a trace. Soon afterward followed the sound of his incontinence.

He didn't even seem to have realized it as Rain placed a hand on his magic sword.

Gazaram tried to hurry to Rain's side. But, at that very moment, someone else rushed forth from beside him.

"Rain!"

Rain blinked, feeling like he was just woken up from a dream, as he looked at Shelfa, who was suddenly standing before him.

Her small hands reached out to grasp his.

"Rain.....?"

Her deep and clear sapphire eyes looked up and into him.

He felt his anger evaporate as he felt her undeniable concern.

At the same time, he was relieved.

Even he had realized how close it'd been.

Just a little more, and I would've done something really stupid.....

He saw the man he had been glaring at collapse to the ground with a dumb look on his face, but Rain didn't care. *Something really must've come over me for me to take their barking seriously.*

He took a deep breath and completely returned to his usual mood.

"Wow. You really are benevolent, Princess. You would even protect people as

worthless as them.”

Shelfa stared long and hard at Rain’s smile and playful words.

Then, after having made sure of something, she relaxed and smiled back.

“.....No. I was worried about you, Rain, rather than him.”

“I see.”

Rain smiled wryly and winked to show that he was all right now. He knew that he had caused her needless worry.

“You coward!”

someone spat out from behind Shelfa.

When Rain looked back, he saw that the muscular man with the sword was looking at his dazed and trembling comrade (probably) with contempt.

“You’re a shame on us nobles for being overpowered by a mere commoner.”

“Exactly! What a disgrace!”

Elena, who had finally regained her senses, blushed red with humiliation as she absentmindedly waved around her white feathered fan.

Then, she turned her fiery eyes to Shelfa.

“I take it that you are Her Royal Highness Princess Shelfa, though this is the first time we’ve met. Allow me to present my formal greetings at a later time.”

Elena stepped down from the carriage and curtsayed.

Then, she glared sharply at Rain and said,

“Your Highness.....you are a person who carries the precious blood of the Sunkwoll royal family. Thus, you ought to choose your retainers wisely. Please, cast that man aside. No matter how many soldiers he may have at his disposal, there is no reason for you to have to rely on a low-born high general when Lord Ralphus and I would accompany you.”

Exasperation, or perhaps even scorn, arose from Rain’s followers. All of them already knew how Shelfa would react to that proposal all too well.

Rain stopped Shelfa from speaking out with his eyes and took another step

forward.

In turn, the two giants from earlier readily stepped in front of Elena.

“I thought I told you to stay put! How dare you approach the Princess without her permission!”

“Look here. It’s disrespectful to call someone else by the Princess’ title, you know? Whose presence do you think you stand in, you muscle-brained idiot!”

Rain had only talked back a little, but that was enough for the giants’ complexion to change. Their deeply chiseled, noble visages warped, and the one with the sword placed a hand on it. He snuck a glance at Elena, probably to request her permission.

Elena gave him a small nod and a chilly smile.

Even Rain understood her intent all too well. She was probably saying something along the lines of, *‘I give you my full permission to teach him a lesson.’*

The man with the thick iron rod clicked his tongue. It was obvious that he felt like he had missed his chance to make himself look good. What a guy he was.

“Hmph. You seem to think that you can get away with beating up a high general like me as long as you have your master’s permission. But don’t worry. No one’s gonna blame you for anything. It’s not like you could possibly touch me anyway.”

“It would do you much good to stop running your mouth like that,”

said Elena with a sly smile. She continued,

“these two are my personal guards. There’s the strongest whom I’ve found after combing through all of Sunkwool, and I’ve no complaints with them. This is your last chance to apologize for your insolence~”

Rain answered her with a derisive smile.

Completely back to his normal self, he smiled leisurely as he beckoned his opponents with his index finger.

“It’s hilarious that you think these blockheads are the strongest. Why don’t I

show you what true strength is and teach you how tough life can be sometimes? C'mon, hurry up and come at me, yeah? You wanna cut me down with that sword of yours, right? I'll let you try. C'mon, have at you!"

Shelfa didn't stop him this time.

It was undoubtedly because she was the first person to understand that, unlike before, Rain wasn't being serious.

Though, Yuri butt in and said, "and he told us to always look for a way to avoid fighting if possible~" but no one paid her any heed.

The man with the sword fell easily to Rain's provocation.

"Who do you think you are?!"

He covered the distance between himself and Rain in a breath with his face flushed red and swung his large sword down at the top of Rain's shoulders. His speed was about average.For a normal person.

There was a bit of tension in his face, but a cruel, expectant smile alighted his lips.

However, his expression froze over in the very next moment.

Rain, who had been standing still, had lazily raised a hand and had stopped the attack with the flesh of his five fingers.

The man's eyes opened in full circles as he saw Rain grabbing his sword.

Rain broke out into a smile.

"What'cha spacing out for? This is reality. Learn how weak you really are and go submerge yourself in an ocean of repentance, fool!"

And also, Rain continued with a grin,

"I hope you didn't *really* think you could swing your sword at a high general like me and walk away free, did you? I mean, how's this any different from treason?"

The man, who'd suddenly realize what kind of situation he was in, tried to pull back his sword.

He had felt the spite that Rain was radiating. However, his sword wouldn't

budge in the slightest no matter how hard his pushed or pulled at it. The difference in their respective strength was too great.

“Go and reflect on your actions!”

Rain rebuked as he let go of the sword and twisted his body to unleash a reverse roundhouse kick as his opponent staggered.

His upper body flexed like a whip and his leg stretched out straight without the slightest bend. It collided precisely into the other man’s chest.

The result was even more spectacular than it would have been if he had been kicked by a horse.

The man with the sword collapsed and flew into the air like a folded piece of paper or something caught by a sudden gust of wind.

He glided through the air with terrifying momentum and crashed into the white carriage behind him, breaking its door into pieces, just as Rain had planned. The impact made the carriage tilt over until it finally toppled comically.

The horses that were attached to it whinnied in shock.

“Kyaaaah! How, how dare you?! My cus, custom-made carriage...!”

Elena dropped her white feathered fan and sandwiched her pallid cheeks with both hands.

Evidently, she couldn’t have cared less about the man with the sword who had passed out frothing at the mouth underneath the carriage.

“Can it! Besides, don’t just stroll on a battlefield in a carriage! I hated that thing as soon as I laid my eyes on it!”

Yeah, that’s right!

The people on Rain’s side cheered in unison. The nobles jeered back at them in response.

The most adamant among them was the man with the iron rod, who had watched his partner get his ass kicked with his mouth hanging open. After his moment of daze had ended, he picked up his iron rod and made long strides toward Rain with anger burning in his eyes.

“Hmm, are you next? You nobles really don’t learn, do you?”

Rain mocked.

Just then, a girl’s voice cheered, “get him, Lord Rain~!” from the gallery. When Rain looked to where it had come from, he saw that it had been Selphie’s.

She timidly waved at him when their eyes met, blushing red as if to show that she was willing to cheer him on despite how embarrassed she felt.

Rain quickly turned back around, though he was honestly a little surprised, and raised a hand, saying, “pft, leave it to me.”

Whooooo!!

A cheer erupted from his allies.

All of them were extremely welcoming of the fact that the nobles were about to experience a beating.

“You think you can just look away from me, you bastard?!”

The crazed angry man with the iron rod swung down his weapon in an artless, but powerful, strike.

One side of the gallery screamed, while the other sneered. It needn’t be said that the sneers had come from the nobles.

It had landed squarely on Rain’s shoulder.

Everyone had heard the dampened sound of the rod hitting flesh.

—However, that was all they heard.

Rain hadn’t even flinched as he remained standing, perfectly fine, and looked up with a cool look on his face.

The man with the iron rod, who had imaged his opponent rolling on the floor in agony with his shoulder shattered, made a sound of confusion as he face became limp.

Rain flashed a grin and showed off his prided, pearly white teeth.

“What was that just now? A fly out of season? And a starving, weakened fly too, geez. Gimme that.”

Rain snatched the iron rod from the man and put some strength in his hands.

The iron rod, which was at least fifteen centimeters thick in diameter, twisted in his hands like malleable toffee.

He easily twisted it to fold it into two almost even halves and tossed it aside.

Rain’s allies applauded in ovation.

“Urk.....”

The man who used to have the iron rod looked down at his fallen weapon as the color drained from his face.

Sweat poured down his face in buckets.

Then, perhaps because he had lost his ability to make sound decisions after becoming cornered, he suddenly flew into a frenzy and attacked Rain bare-handedly.

“Wh, whoaaaaa!”

He released a punch with too much swing that didn’t even have a clear target. Rain evaded it easily and readily stepped into the man’s space and caught him by the arms and the belt of his pants.

“Alright! Go fly, number two!”

Rain punched the man high into the sky as he shouted. The man left behind only a scream as he shot up diagonally into the air like an arrow.

He climbed upward with a force that could have never been generated with human strength. It was like he was a leaf that had been easily blown in the air. The man flapped his arms and legs uselessly as the entire crowd looked over him in silence and then began his descent upon reaching the apex of his flight.

Just as Rain had predicted, he fell squarely on top of the toppled carriage.

The grand din of destruction sounded as if to ensure everyone that the carriage had been destroyed.

It had been smashed into so many pieces that it could no longer hold its original shape. No one would have imagined that the pile of firewood before them had once been a carriage.

The two giant men were passed out in the middle of the wreckage with their eyes rolling back.

“— —Whew.”

Rain sighed as he brushed back his hair and nihilistically whispered to himself, “they were so weak that I can’t even call this practice. This victory feels so empty.....”

His comrades erupted in cheers upon hearing his words.

Some of them were even laughing so hard that they had to hold on to their stomachs as they pointed fingers at the nobles, who were standing as still as gravestones with ashen faces.

Besides, even Gazaram and Leni, who were technically supposed to have stopped them, were secretly cheering along with them. Senoa alone had a complicated look on her face, but the edges of her lips were still curved in a satisfied smile.

On the other hand, the nobles looked at Rain, dumbfounded. Even the knights, who were jeering earlier, had completely quieted down.

They had heard the rumors about Rain being a Dragon Slayer and such, but they hadn’t believed them until undeniable proof was presented before their eyes.

However— —

The girl called Elena was feeling a completely different feeling from fear and awe. To put it bluntly, she was much more ignorant of the workings of the world than even Shelfa and the inhuman display of strength she had witnessed had held no effect on her.

What did affect her, however, was the sole fact that her carriage had been destroyed.....

Elena stared absentmindedly at her demolished carriage until she steadily began to quiver bit by bit until she finally exploded in outrage.

“H, h.....how, how dare you?! Just how much money do you think this carriage cost?! H, how dare you, you lowly commoner——”

“You!”

Rain pointed sternly at Elena and warned her in a low voice,

“shut it. I’m a guy who’s generally sweet on girls, but even I have my limits. Whine any more, and I’ll lift up your skirt and spank you.”

“Wha.....”

As Elena was stunned into silence, Senoa, happier than she had ever sounded before, said, “hahaha..... Let me warn you as a fellow noble. The General is someone who always keeps his word, no matter how vulgar it may be. I can tell you that from personal experience.”

“Ehhhhhhhh!?” (Yuri and Selphie’s voices)

“Ugh.....”

Elena picked up her white feathered fan and retreated.

She subconsciously held down her skirt as she did.

Sullenly, Rain said,

“hey Senoa. Just when have I ever spanked you? If you keep spouting nonsense like that, you’ll——”

“S, such insolence!”

Elena interrupted with a hoarse screech. She continued,

“how.....how dare you humiliate me!”

Her lips quivered as she pointed her white fingers at Rain in accusation.

“I won’t forgive you for this, even if you are an acquaintance of Lord Ralphus!”

Glaring daggers, she then turned to her household retainers. It was immediately obvious that she had lost all self-restraint.

Then, words that were exemplar of the textbook heinous noble spilled from her bright red lips.

“All of you, attack them at once!”

The nobles began to move at once upon receiving their mistress’ commands.

Shelfa was at a loss as to whether she should stop them or not while Leni, Gazaram, and Senoa were about to run to Rain’s side before he even gave the order.

——Just then, however.

“Settle down, all of you!”

A frigid shout returned everything back to zero.

Ralphus had returned.

Both sides stopped moving just as they were about to clash with one another and looked up at him as he approached on horseback.

“What is going on and why is everyone so riled up?”

Ralphus promptly returned to his usual quiet tone and surveyed the soldiers.

His eyes met with Elena’s and he furrowed his brows.

“.....Elena. Why are you here?”

“L, Lord Ralphus.....”

Rain was immediately taken aback by the sound of her voice.

Did she really make that sickly-sweet noise just now?

What happened to that stuck-up coldness from before!?

However, Elena now cared less about Rain than she would a weed off the side of the road and ran up to Ralphus after he dismounted and latched onto his arm.

“Oh, Lord Ralphus..... I’m so glad to finally see you again! I find myself at a loss for the words to describe this joy that threatens to burst through my heart.....”

The spirit of battle that had once filled the area evaporated without a trace.

The nobles remained comparatively composed (evidently, they were used to this), but the soldiers on Rain’s side gawked at the scene with their mouths hanging open.

Everyone stared absentmindedly and stupidly at Elena and Ralphus because the fact that they were engaged had not spread very far.

Looking unusually troubled, Ralphus opened his mouth to say something to Rain as Elena clung on and rubbed herself against him.

However, Rain beat him to the punch.

“Hey, so what’s the deal between you two? I mean, I heard the gist of things, but now I’m lost again.”

“——No, there isn’t really anything going on between...”

Elena thrust out her voluptuous breasts and spoke over Ralphus, declaring,

“Lord Ralphus and I have gone all the way to vow our fates to one another!”

Elena’s shocking statement set off a ripple of commotion around her.

Rain stared long and hard at them with his black eyes.

I feel like.....I just heard something incredulous just now.

“.....All the way!? You were okay with someone like her?!”

Before Ralphus could answer, Rain whispered to himself,

“no, well, I’m not one to judge others for their preferences..... But, isn’t it pretty bad to choose a partner based only on their figure? I mean, it’s not like we’re talking about a brothel here, so...”

“That’s not it, Rain.”

Ralphus interjected, unable to put up with it any longer. He continued, “you’ve got it all wrong. Elena is referring to marriage.”

“Indeed! I, Elena, have come to your assistance, Lord Ralphus, for the sake of our shared futures! Please leave everything to me.”

This woman really only has eyes for Ralphus, thought Rain. He was sure that she had undoubtedly marched all the way here not to aid Shelfa, but for the sake of her beloved Ralphus.

In other words, she wasn’t thinking about anything.

Ralphus had apparently reached the same conclusion.

He sighed as he peeled Elena off of him and looked her in the eyes.

“Elena, I’ve already given you my answer regarding marriage. Besides, this upcoming war isn’t a game. All of us here are putting our lives at stake.”

I have zero intention of putting my life at stake over the likes of Safir.



Only Shelfa had heard Rain's retort.

Elena didn't look particularly depressed as everyone observed her and instead looked up at Ralphus with her sparkling blue eyes.

"My! I am putting my life at stake as well, naturally. I am always prepared to put down this life of mine for the sake of my beloved. I, Elena, will pine after you forever, Lord Ralphus~"

She ecstatically buried her face in Ralphus' chest.

.....Well, at least there's no doubting that she likes him, Rain thought.

Elena's passionate attack appeared to be the real deal even in Rain's skeptical eyes.

However, he also thought that her very ardor would make her difficult to deal with.

Rain sighed and shook his head.

He turned to his friend and unintentionally grumbled,

".....hey, you really brought in one fine piece of work."

"There's not much I can do even if you say that to me,"

Ralphus answered, truly troubled.

Chapter 4: Chandrys Invades

Part 1

A little while after Elena and her uninvited reinforcements had caused an uproar at Cortecreas Castle— —

Folnier Lucida Chandrys, the empress of Chandrys, was holding a war council.

She surveyed the circular table of a total of four generals (and one general-class soldier), with Joe at its head, in turns.

Each one of them was a knight-captain who supervised over a thousand knights and was also a respectable liege lord to boot.

In other words, they were those who held the position of ‘general’ in the Chandrys military.

“The situation is just as what I’ve said. We will begin our invasion of Sunkwoll as soon as you’re ready. Does anyone have any objections?”

One person swiftly raised his hand.

Folnier looked inquisitive as she said,

“.....I’d thought that you’d be the first to approve, Zartz. Is there something that displeases you?”

“Never! You misunderstand me, Your Majesty.”

The twenty-something year old youth named Zartz brushed back his unkempt black hair and added, “didn’t mean it that way.” He continued, “I meant to ask,

why aren't we taking over all of Sunkwoll's territory while we're at it!? I mean. Why are we limiting ourselves to just Safir?"

"Hmm, that's a good question."

Folnier placed her elbows on the round table and rested her chin on top of her entwined fingers. She gazed at Zartz pleasantly and continued, "that's what you'd normally think. And I'd do it, if I was being serious. After all, I'm not particularly fond of the idea of a partial invasion myself. But there's a reason we need to approach it carefully this time. Joe and Shing have both agreed with me on this."

Zartz and the other three generals looked at Joe and Shing equally at Folnier's words. Joe got the ball rolling in response.

"I'm sure all of you are aware. Rain is in Sunkwoll. As someone who is well aware of how strong he is, I'd rather not do anything careless. Truthfully, I'm not very eager to support this plan."

Zartz and Shing looked at Joe with a sudden sense of dread encroaching their faces. They were afraid of what Folnier's reaction to his casually stated protest would be.

However, Folnier simply smiled and cast a sideways glance at Joe.

"My Grand General certainly is stern. I'll take your words of rebuke as they are."

Then, she stuck out her chest and righted her posture.

With a deep breath, she decisively declared,

"sorry, but I won't be changing my objective. We'll keep our established objective and move to invade Sunkwoll."

It was truly a sudden proclamation.

She had always been the type of ruler who didn't hold grudges. This made it exceptionally easy for the people under her give her advice. On the flip side, however, it also meant that Folnier could be terribly stubborn sometimes. For instance, there were many cases in which she refused to listen to even Joe's, who had held a position of authority since before she was born, words.

This was one such case.

Joe bowed silently.

“Then I suppose war is inevitable. It’ll affect morale if I admonish you any further, so I won’t. Let us discuss what methods we can take to win henceforth.

“Yeah. I really evaluate that attitude of yours highly. I’ll leave it in your capable hands.....or so I say, but I plan on joining you this time around.”

“——! You’re planning on leading this military expedition personally as the Empress, Your Majesty?”

Zartz was the first to respond.

He sounded quite happy.

“Indeed, though I’ll only be watching over your efforts.”

“Heheh, my arms are twitching for some action!”

he said as he literally began flexing his muscles. It showed clearly that he wasn’t trying to butter up to his ruler but was honestly ecstatic that he would be allowed to let loose.

On the other hand, one person responded in a manner which Folnier hadn’t expected.

“Wow~. The famous ‘Unknown Genius’ of Sunkwoll, huh? I’ve always wanted to meet him. Junna’s one too, but I’ve always had a lot of respect for geniuses.”

The owner of the voice was so casual and carefree that he might as well have completely forgotten that they were in the middle of a war council.

He was just about as young as Zartz. Yet, while Zartz clearly looked every part the warrior no matter how you looked at him, this young man carried the peaceful atmosphere of a country bumpkin fresh out of the countryside.

And, sitting nestled up close right next to him was a young girl with beautiful chestnut-colored hair.

The two of them were siblings.

.....Or at the very least, that’s how it was on paper.

“Are you stupid, Sayle?! That’s super contradictory!”

Zartz butt in sullenly. He continued,

“what do you mean, the *famous ‘Unknown Genius’*? That makes absolutely no sense!”

“Oh, huh. I guess you’re right. Ahaha!”

Sayle laughed without the slightest trace of restraint.

Zartz was about to make more sarcastic comments at Sayle, but he closed his mouth in a panic upon noticing the fixated glare coming from the girl sitting beside the latter.

“No. It’s not like I was trying to nitpick Sayle or anything— —”

He was discomposed.

To put salt on his wounds, Junna swiftly turned away in the middle of his excuse.

Zartz became visibly depressed.

Shing, who was relatively old in comparison to the other members at the council, looked over the entire exchange and shook his head.

“.....We have such a warm and fuzzy atmosphere going on during a war council right before we invade Sunkwoll. Is this really okay?”

“It’s fine, isn’t it, Shing?”

Folnier laughed in high spirits and continued,

“I have nothing to complain about as long as they’re able to fight properly when it counts. Whether it be Zartz, or Sayle, or Junna..... I have no doubts about them when it comes to their actual abilities. It’s fine if they relax a little now while they can.”

Shing silently bowed his head.

He, too, knew of Sayle and the others’ abilities.

Folnier surveyed the mostly young generals and gave a big nod.

“Now then. Allow me to express my thoughts now that you’ve all agreed. As

Joe's said, Rain is a man whom we should be very wary of. I've felt this about him myself after meeting him."

Folnier smiled and gently closed her eyes as if she was recalling their meeting.

But then, she promptly opened her eyes again and forcefully said,

"however. Individual military prowess cannot change the fate of a decaying kingdom! I'll be looking forward to the fruits of your actions!"

Joe and the other generals bowed after their ruler's fervent speech.

But——Joe secretly thought to himself,

is that really true?

Certainly, one individual's military prowess was of little significance before the flames of war. Battles were generally decided by the quantity of troops that fought them. There was no doubting that.

Yet, he didn't think that Rain's natural talents were limited only to his military prowess.

As proof, he had already repelled the invasion of a large kingdom like Zarmine once.

An army that was led by an excellent general occasionally demonstrated strength beyond their actual abilities. Time and time again they overcame the absolute difference of sheer numbers.

Joe understood this truth better than anyone else who was present.

Chandrys promptly completed her military preparations upon receiving Folnier's stubborn resolve and organized a unit to attack Sunkwoll.

Its numbers were composed of seven thousand cavalry and thirteen thousand

foot soldiers——a large army totaling twenty thousand.

Aside from Zarmine, the strong country of the north, or Leyfan, the neighboring large country—— Of the cluster of small countries currently located in the south of the continent, only Chandrys had the resources and ability to mobilize an army this large.

Chandrys had been victorious in all of the large-scale wars she had waged and could be said to have steadily increased her nationalistic might from doing so.

After just a few days of preparation, Empress Folnier had her large army depart for their western neighbor, Sunkwoll, though it was Joe Lamberck who actually commanded it.

The march through Chandrys' internal borders was going exceedingly well. There wasn't much of a wealth disparity in Chandrys, and Folnier's impartial administration of the country was welcomed by the great majority of her citizens.

In addition, there was no one who didn't know of Joe Lamberck's mystique and undefeated military history.

There was genuine respect and love in the citizens' voices as they welcomed Joe and Folnier when they passed the highway.

It was quite troublesome because there were people who would follow after the army.

And so, even Joe was a little relieved by the time they had finally reached Chandrys' border.

"You're as popular as ever, Lord Joe,"

Sayle said as he drew his horse closer while they traveled across the highway that weaved through the mountains.

Joe only saw a handsome young man as he cast a glance at Sayle, who was beaming brightly, with Junna, who did not know how to ride a horse, saddled in front of him.

No, well, he actually is just a handsome young man.

“.....I must ensure that I don’t betray their trust,”

Joe replied quietly.

Even if this was a war he would rather not fight, he couldn’t help the fact that it had already begun.

He had no choice but to achieve a secure victory with the fewest casualties possible.

“You’re right. Junna and I’ll have to do our best too. Let’s do our best, okay, Junna?”

Sayle said to his younger sister, who was securely entrusting her weight to her older brother as they rode together. Junna looked up with her cherubic eyes and beamed. She raised the precious magic staff in her hands up a little.

“.....I’ll do my best to help you, brother,”

she said totteringly.

Junna, a girl who was ‘general-class’ at just shy of seventeen, was quite attached to her older brother.

“Mmhmm. You freely wield the alias, “Genius Mage,” after all. I’ll be counting on you.But you can’t be too far away from me, okay?”

Junna nodded in agreement.

She wouldn’t have willingly left her brother’s side even if Sayle hadn’t said that. Or so Joe thought.

Driven by a sudden impulse, Joe decided to speak to Sayle. He didn’t want the two siblings to get hurt. He was worried for them.

“Sayle, there’s something I want to warn you about.”

“I’ll listen to whatever it is that you have to say, Lord Joe. What is it?”

“——I’ll do my best to keep this from happening. But, even if you end up encountering Rain during this battle, don’t ever challenge him in single combat.”

Sayle and Junna, who had been riding neck-to-neck with Joe, opened their eyes wide together.

They couldn't be blamed for their surprise.

After all, Joe's words were too diffident to be considered as good advice for people who were about to head to a battlefield. Even Joe, the giver of this advice, was aware of this.

It was normally not something that he should have said.

However, Sayle did not frown upon hearing Joe's words.

Instead, his friendly smile disappeared as he stared directly at Joe.

".....Lord Joe, you're well-aware of how strong I, no, how strong Junna and I are when we team up together. Considering that you're saying not to fight him even still, I guess that this Rain person is stronger than the rumors say."

"He's strong.....stronger than you can imagine,"

Joe said without mincing his words. He continued,

"not only that, but he's also extremely obsessed about winning, to the point that it's troubling. The rumors about him are still too naïve. He really has defeated the strongest of mythical beasts, if nothing else."

"A Dragon Slayer, huh.Man, I wanna meet him all the more now. I kinda look up to people who're overflowing with talent like that."

Joe smiled wryly at Sayle's happy tone.

"I understand that this is one of the things that makes you so endearing, but please, don't forget my advice."

"It's okay! I know where I stand,"

the agreeable youth resolutely guaranteed.

He stroked Junna's chestnut-colored hair, which was directly in front of his eyes, and continued, "besides, it'd be one thing if I was alone, but Junna's with me too. So I get it. Even if I happen to encounter him, I'll only watch him and do nothing else! If he comes after me, I'll run away immediately!"

Sayle reassuringly stated his terribly pessimistic statement.

A smile had formed at the edges of Joe's lips before he realized it.

"I'm glad you understand.Though I suppose it'd be best I don't give Zartz the same advice."

"Well, yes, I agree,"

said Sayle with a grin. He continued,

"he'd go straight for Rain if you did. He really hates losing."

Joe and Sayle exchanged glances and laughed. Only Junna was left staring at them blankly in bewilderment.

By the way, Sayle said nonchalantly,

"if Junna and I teamed up to fight time ten times.....we'd have the chance to win at least once, right?"

"No."

Joe shook his head decisively. He continued,

"rather——"

If you fought him a hundred times, you'd lose all one hundred battles.

Joe closed his mouth before the words came out. He felt that it wasn't something that he should be saying to a warrior, regardless of how truthful it may be.

Actually, considering their abilities, it was possible that even Rain would lose against the siblings in certain situations.

But even still, Joe thought otherwise.

Even when faced with such an unfavorable situation, Rain's tenacity would conclude the battle with his victory in the end.

Truly, that man is so obsessed, though without any ill intentions, in the concept of "winning" that even Zartz, who hates losing, couldn't match his tenacity.

In addition, there was something else that Joe had completely come to believe after having fought Rain directly: There was something to be feared about him even other than his genius talent.

— — *That man isn't afraid of death.*

He didn't have the fear that all humans should naturally have.

He had properly defended against Joe's attacks when they had fought, of course.

And perfectly too, at that.

However, it hadn't been because he was afraid of suffering injury.....or so Joe felt. Instead, Joe thought that it had simply been the natural conclusion of Rain's composed calculations, so to speak.

It's more effective to defeat an opponent by evading their attacks than it is to suffer them and risk slowing down from the wounds.

And so, Rain had defended himself with clear coldness.

If it was only possible to achieve victory against Rain through a mutual kill..... Rain would go through with it without hesitation.

And he wouldn't hesitate even for a minute before doing so.

While being something beyond talent or skill, it was also the primary thing that made Rain different from Zartz or Sayle. Even Zartz would hesitate at least a little when faced with such extreme situations. However, Rain did not have those meager few seconds that he should. And that— — Would lead him to step in deeper and attack more aggressively.

In the end, he would defeat his opponent.

To begin with, it was impossible to defeat him even if you were equally as strong as him (if it was even possible for that to be true of anyone other than Joe himself).

That was to say nothing of Zartz, Sayle, and Shing, who were so much weaker

than Rain that the difference was comparable to that of the heavens and earth.....

Sayle felt something as he watched Joe in the latter's hesitation to speak and gulped audibly.

Not only that, but he also displayed exaggerated fear as he hugged Junna closer to him and said, "whoa, I'll definitely not go near him!"

Well, half of his attitude had been just for show.

Still, Sayle always put his younger sister's wellbeing first and foremost. He would probably heed Joe's advice.

".....Please don't. That being said, it's not as if you can blatantly avoid fighting him in front of everyone else, so I'll do my best to rush to your aid.Only if it gets to that, of course."

Then, Junna, who had been looking back and forth between her brother and Joe up until then, inquisitively said, "my older brother is strong. He won't lose to anyone."

Sayle and Joe swiftly exchanged looks and laughed.

Then, just as Sayle had placed a hand on Junna's shoulder and was about to say something to her—— "Grand General!"

A knight who had been sent to scout ahead had returned.

"What is it?"

Joe stiffened up his expression at once.

They were already near the fortress at the border.

Joe doubted it was the case, but it was possible that the knight had caught sight of Sunkwoll soldiers.

But, instead, the knight, who had galloped in at full speed, twisted his visage into an ambiguously complicated look and said, "there was something right in front of the fortress."

"Something? What was it?"

"I don't believe that it poses any immediate danger..... But it'd be faster for

you to see it for yourself,”

the knight stumbled over his words.

Joe knit his brows, but only for a moment, and immediately shrugged and noted his acknowledgement.

He had been planning to spend a night at the fortress anyhow.

“It’s fine as long as it doesn’t pose any danger.If it’s faster to see it for myself, then that’s what I’ll do.”

They continued the march and Joe finally understood what was going on after they had arrived at the border fortress.

He also understood why the scout had worn such a strange look.

I see, this really is difficult to react to.

A brand new and ginormous signpost was standing conspicuously right across from the Chandrys fortress.....in other words, right off the side of the Sunkwoll highway that was within a stone’s throw from the fortress.

It was easily three times larger than a normal signpost.

There used to be an inconsequential signpost that showed how far it was from the capital, Lydia, but it had been pulled out and cast off to the side.

In its place was the signpost in question that was facing the Chandrys border fortress instead. More precisely, it was asserting its presence in a rather self-important manner.

Joe was able to read the writing on the signboard even from the fortress watchtower with his superior vision.

“To those who would invade our borders with wicked intentions,

Abandon all hope henceforth if you don’t plan to have a change of heart.

—To put it simply:

Don’t underestimate me, damn it!

Yours truly, Phantom Thief Black Mask”

How should I put this.....this is truly skillful penmanship.

*It's much too obvious as for who came up with the content, but I wonder if he wrote it as well. If so, he has great handwriting.*Zartz happened to run by as Joe looked on in admiration and looked at the signpost in similar fashion.

His face grew deep red once he had finally read the writing on the signpost by squinting and re-reading it multiple times over with strenuous effort.

“What’s this nonsense about “Phantom Thief Black Mask”?! Who’s that even supposed to be anyway?! Stop messing around with usss!”

Zartz drew his sword explosively and was about to break out into a run. Joe stopped him by swiftly catching hold of his shoulder.

“Wait, Zartz. Where are you planning to go with your sword drawn?”

“——Isn’t that obvious?! I’m gonna go chop up that disgusting sign!”

“It’s best if you don’t,”

Joe admonished him quietly. He continued,

“just let it be. That signpost isn’t going to kill anyone. Don’t get provoked by such trivial things, Zartz. Your opponent will only become all the happier the angrier you get.”

Zartz didn’t quite seem to agree with the sentiment, but it seemed that the line about making his opponents happier had worked.

Zartz fell silent in discontent.

He re-sheathed his sword for the time being.

Joe pat him on the shoulder without another word and called out to the soldiers who had been observing them from the vicinity.

“Did anyone see who erected that sign?”

A few guards stealthily exchanged looks upon his words. It looked like they

were hesitant to speak up after witnessing how angry Zartz had become. They probably didn't want to get caught up in his anger and be reprimanded for it.

Joe smiled and said,

"I'm not going to blame you. I simply want to know the details."

Finally, one youth stepped forward. Joe asked him,

"did you see what happened?"

"Yessir.Actually, a lot of people did."

"Hmm. Tell me what you know. Just who.....was it that had so much free time on his hands?"

"Yessir, that's——"

Joe somehow managed to get the details of what had happened after pacifying and relieving the youth, who spoke in a roundabout manner, of his worries.

To sum it up, the course of events had occurred as follows:

Just some time ago, a man who had looked like he was in a terrifyingly horrible mood had ridden up to where the old signpost had been while carrying the large signpost across his shoulder.

He had pulled out the old signpost and set up the one he had been carrying in its place and had written the message with black charcoal in one go right where he stood.

Then. As soon as he had finished writing, he nodded solemnly and spun the signpost around to face the fortress and had left back the way he had come without so much as a smile.....and that was what had happened.

Incidentally——

'He' had looked sour throughout the entire ordeal from start to finish and had left without even sparing a single glance at his objective, the fortress.....

Joe readily thought up of the image of the man who had silently served Rain by his side in his mind. If he wasn't mistaken, the man's name had been

Gunther.

There's no doubt. He was the man who came to erect that thing on purpose on Rain's orders.

.....And all the way out here, too.

"You goddamned idiot!"

Zartz howled, unlike the calm and composed Joe. He continued,

"why the hell did you guys just watch and let him do it?!"

"But, but sir!"

the youth said, flustered,

"that's still Sunkwoll territory. I couldn't just tell him not to put up the signpost there. Besides, it's not like we've officially started a war with them yet....."

"The hell are you talking about?! All you had to do was let an arrow loose without thinking up of all that crap——"

"Enough, Zartz,"

Joe interjected. He continued,

"it's just as he's said. As of yet, we don't have any intention of making Rain's side, who has Princess Shelfa with them, our enemy. He was right to simply watch it happen."

"But!"

Zartz swelled up his cheeks like a child and said,

"it's obvious from that message that *they* plan on fighting us!"

Even Zartz didn't usually talk back to Joe, but he was evidently unable to stomach the situation this time around.

They had been marching for several days after departing from the capital, Zawoll. Sunkwoll had most likely already noticed their movements. After all, it was obvious to see who their target was because their army was marching directly west.

Or, well, Safir might not know about anything despite that, but Rain's side had surely noticed.

There was no doubt that Rain's spies had already reported back about the march in detail.

".....We'll send out a messenger to explain our circumstances to them soon. They'll probably reach Cortecreas Castle in a few days. We can decide on our course of action depending on the reply the messenger brings back, after we've seen it. So don't jump the gun just yet. There's no need to make ourselves additional enemies on purpose."

"What kind of message are you planning on having the messenger take to them?"

It was none other than Folnier who answered Zartz's doubt-filled question.

"What, it's not like I thought up of anything much. "Our enemy is Safir alone. Thus, we seek your tacit consent."After consulting with Joe, I decided just to give them the truth as plainly as possible."

Joe and Zartz bowed to Folnier, who had walked over to them from across the road.

When he looked back up again, Joe said,

"well, it should be adequate. All that's left is to see how they respond."

"Hmmm.Maybe we should have sent out a messenger earlier? I wonder if he mistakenly thought that we were going to lump him together with Safir when we attack? No, well, it's entirely possible that he'll be pissed off even if he understands the situation,"

said Folnier, not quite regretfully, before she walked up to the watchtower and cheerfully looked down at the signpost.

Following after her were the many footsteps of Sayle, Junna, and even Shing, causing the already narrow watchtower to become full at max capacity.

The generals who followed after her had already seen the signpost long ago, but they observed the signpost for a while once again.

After a brief moment——

“Kekeke,”

Folnier chortled.

“Ahh haha!”

Sayle laughed out loud while pointing at the sign, and even Junna followed his lead and smiled.

“.....Why is he, what is his reason for calling himself a ‘phantom thief’? Sir Rain is the only person who’d do something like this, no matter how you think about it. Does he have experience in burglary or something?”

Only Shing commented on the signpost in all seriousness.

“What the hell?! Why isn’t anyone else getting pissed off?!”

Zartz was the only person who didn’t find the situation funny. Still, he was interested in knowing why the three who had met Rain previously, including Joe, were so certain that the culprit was Rain.

“Keke.....oh, don’t be mad, Zartz,”

Folnier said merrily with her shoulders still shaking with laughter. She continued,

“indeed, the culprit is obviously him no matter how you spin it. Is, isn’t our Rain quite the pleasant man? Joe, you agree, don’t you?”

“.....By your will. He’s probably the only person on this continent who’d purposefully send out his men to do something like this.”

“Is that how you see it?”

Zartz, still in a bad mood, continued,

“I don’t like this one bit.”

“Um, Lord Joe. There’s something I don’t understand,”

asked Shing while giving Zartz, who looked offended, a side-eye. He continued,

“what is the meaning behind the signpost? What was his reason for going out of his way to dispatch someone here to erect it?”

“There probably isn’t one.”

Joe smiled before he knew it once the words had left his mouth.

Really, is that something an adult should be doing?

“There’s no reason to it. If I had to say there was one, though, it’s probably that he wanted to cause some mischief.That’s the kind of man he is.”

Shing shook his head, exasperated, upon hearing Joe’s words. As serious as he was, he probably couldn’t understand Rain’s actions.

The signpost probably wasn’t the only reason Gunther had come all the way out here, of course. Even Joe could guess that much.

Gunther’s primary mission was probably to investigate their movements. The signpost was probably just a bonus.

Still, Joe was confident.

That regardless of whether he had the objective of gathering intel or not, Gunther had carried the signpost here on Rain’s orders.

And, instead of raising his eyebrows at Rain for doing something like this when he was almost twenty-six years old, it actually made him like Rain all the more.

Of course, that didn’t mean that he would pull out of the war just because of that.

“Well then. We’ll finally be in Sunkwoll territory tomorrow..... I wonder what Rain’s reply will be?”

Joe whispered to himself.

Everyone present heard the faint smile in the sound of his voice.

The faint sound of crackling firewood echoed throughout the otherwise quiet room.

It was caused by the brightly burning blaze of the fireplace in the room of Cortecreas Castle to which the messenger had been guided.

Thanks to that, the messenger who had dutifully run across the highway in the freezing cold winter was able to warm up his body. He was considerably thankful for it.

The castle lacked an audience chamber, so his audience with the Sunkwoll princess simply took place in a remodeled reception hall.

The princess that sat down on a hastily improvised throne before the messenger had bowed his head before her, and, from then on, he could not help but sneak occasional glances at her beautiful figure, more beautiful than the rumors of her had foretold.

She had long, straight, and blindingly blonde hair that fell down behind the throne and a girlishly delicate, yet still perfectly-shaped bridge of the nose. In addition, she had deep blue eyes that were beautiful beyond compare.

He had heard that trueborn noblewomen of Sunkwoll were all extremely beautiful because of their characteristically blue eyes, and he could not help but agree with the statement with all his heart.

The messenger felt that it was worth having risked his life to come here just to have even one glimpse of her.

Only, the beautiful princess was unfortunately not the only person before him, as the rumored Rain was standing next to her.

Just as the rumors had said, he was dressed in all black garb as he towered beside the princess, who was in formal dress, like a guardian deity.

The messenger hadn't forgotten that Grand General Joe Lamberck had personally warned him to be wary of Rain.

Naturally, he had also seen the signpost that had been erected the other day with his own eyes as well.

This was why he had been literally prepared to die as he asked for an audience, but.....

Rain suddenly opened his mouth.

“Sir Messenger,”

he said gently.

“Y, yess!”

The messenger’s voice came out like that of a chicken with its neck being wrung due to a blend of nervousness and fear.

The princess, who had been reading over Folnier’s letter, raised her head at his voice but soon returned her gaze to the paper in her hands.The edges of her lips were curled up in a smile for some reason.

Rain, the crucial point of the messenger’s focus, opened his black eyes wide and said,

“oh no, please be at ease..... I simply called out to you because you appeared to be a little nervous. Are you feeling unwell, perhaps?”

he asked in a truly polite manner.

.....Rain was somehow so completely different from the image of him that the messenger had heard so much about that he was bewildered.

The messenger had been quivering in fear that he would be killed if he upset Rain somehow, but Rain showed no sign of ever doing such a thing. Rather, Rain was treating him like a guest of honor.

Still feeling that something was a bit off about the princess and her retainer, the messenger suddenly recalled something as he replied appropriately and said, “um, about the signpost.....”

while still trembling with fear.

Rain looked so surprised as he curiously asked, “hmm? What about a signpost?” that the messenger was shocked.

Rain really looked like he had no idea what the messenger was talking about.

At this rate, the messenger felt like he was about to become ‘the idiot who

suddenly sprouts nonsense.'

And so, unable to do anything else, he said,

"no, it's nothing....."

as vaguely as he could.

Thankfully, the princess had finished reading through the letter and had looked up.

".....Do you also know of what was written in this letter?"

"Yes..... The gist of it.....at least."

He looked away restlessly.

He felt guilty for having thrust a letter containing an unreasonable request at her, even if it was his duty to do so.

The princess, however, did not look upset.

Instead, she smiled at him with a smile that was filled with so much kindness and affection that it made him want to reconsider his entire life.

"Then, is there anything else you would like to add on to it?"

"N, no, not in particular. Though, I'd like to receive a letter from you in reply if possible. That was what Her Majesty wished for."

"In that case, I already have one prepared."

"——Huh?"

While he was flabbergasted for a moment, Rain, upon receiving the princess' gaze, approached him elegantly and handed him something that was probably the reply in question. It was placed inside a cylindrical paper tube and sealed with candlewax.

Additionally, it was tied in a flamboyant ribbon.

And it was pink, too.....

"Here you go. This is the Princess' reply."

"Eh.....no, but... I only just got here."

“Do you mean to ask why we already have a reply prepared?”

“——Yes.”

Rain smiled bewitchingly at the messenger, who nodded fearfully. It was the brilliant smile of someone who was meeting with a friend of over ten years.

You're my precious friend!

——was what he felt like Rain's eyes were saying.

“Well, you've already invaded into our lands, after all. We've simply been thinking about various things on our end.”

It barely answered the question.

Did he mean to say that they had already predicted that a messenger like himself would come to them?

That was impossible.

Before anything else, however, the messenger thought that Rain's kind smile was inexplicably creepy.

The fact that Rain, someone who was in the important position of high general, was being so strangely polite to him was creepy as well.

Both points were completely contrary to the man's reputation.

Furthermore, the princess was giggling too, for some reason.

The two of them weren't actually outraged, were they? It was said that extreme anger was sometimes expressed with a smile. Their lands had been invaded, after all. It was only natural to think that they would be upset.

The messenger thought that this was most likely the case. Their patience would wear out when he turned his back, and they would switch over to a look of pure rage as, when his back was exposed to them, they would—— “Is something the matter, Sir Messenger? You don't look so well.....”

Rain asked with goodwill dripping in every single word.

He looked like he wanted to give the messenger a hug at any moment.

The princess laughed again as if she was having fun. With a florid voice, at

that.

The messenger shuddered from the bottom of his heart.

He had never before known such fear in the thirty-five years of his life.

“No! There’s nothing wrong! A, and, I’ve received your reply! P, please excuse me!”

He gripped the paper tube tightly in his hand as he did a right about-face and headed for the exit with unnatural speed. His right hand and right leg were moving together in sync.

He hadn’t yet been told that he was allowed to leave, but he didn’t care. It was something that he could care about only if he was still alive.

He didn’t want to stay there for even another second.

Thankfully, the two guards near the door obediently opened it for him.

——And then.

“Sir Messenger!”

Rain called out to him in an abysmally cheery voice.

“Y, yesh!?”

The messenger’s body froze up at once.

“It’s been dangerous as of late.”

Then, with a suddenly ominous note to his voice, Rain continued,

“after all.....some random country has suddenly invaded a small and innocent kingdom out of the blue. You really must be vigilant these days (and then the princess laughed again).”

“Y, yes!”

The messenger was no longer able to express any other words.

“Well, that aside. In any case.....do be careful on your travels. ——I’ll be praying for your safety.....since it’s been dangerous as of late~”

The messenger was at the end of his rope.

He ran out of the reception hall without even replying. His footsteps, so fast that it sounded like he was tripping over his feet, grew farther and farther away.

“Hahaha!”

“Teehee”

Rain and Shelfa laughed for a while as they looked at the door that had been slammed open.

As he laughed, Rain waved his hand at the guards standing by the door and ordered, “I have something to discuss with the Princess, so you guys can leave.”

Once they saluted and left, he looked down at Shelfa, who was seated on the throne (actually just an extravagant chair), and winked.

“Did you see how scared he looked? Like, isn’t it fun to mess with people?”

“Of course not. It, it’s a bad thing to do.”

Her words weren’t very persuasive, however, because she was still giggling.

When Rain pointed this out, Shelfa placed a hand to her lips and protested.

“Well, you were being so uncharacteristically polite with such a straight face.....and it was hilarious.”

She was trying to hold in her laughter, possibly because she felt guilty about it, but was unsuccessful in her attempts.

“Hmph. I can be the politest person in the world if I felt like it. There just aren’t many people who I bother being polite to.”

Rain placed his hand on the faintly fragrant blonde hair below his gaze and toyed with it.

Shelfa’s gorgeous hair, which she always kept well-brushed, was truly pleasant to the touch. Shelfa, too, lightly closed her eyes as if she also felt good.

She moved to one side of the throne as if to get even a litter closer to Rain, who was still standing beside her.

“It makes me happier when you talk to me normally like you are now.....”

“Yeah, I’ll do that when it’s just the two of us. —By the way...”

Shelfa opened her eyes and looked up at Rain in discontent when he drew back his hand as he spoke.

With a wry smile, he placed his hand on her delicate shoulder in exchange.

“By the way, I had something I needed to talk to you about. I want to use a little more of the treasure we brought out of Galfort. Or, actually, I’ve already used some. Sorry I’m only asking you after the fact.”

“Please use it as you wish. You can do anything you like with it, I won’t mind.Is the money for the battle with Chandrys? Is there no way we can avoid fighting?”

Shelfa finally stopped smiling and looked serious.

“Even if we don’t want to fight, there’s nothing else we can do if they chose to invade us anyway. It’s not like you were thinking that it was okay to let that vixen invade us if she was only going after Safir, right?”

He had been reading the letter Shelfa had received from her side, so he knew what Chandrys’ stance was.

Well, regardless of what they said, their own course of action had already been decided upon. This was why they had been able to prepare a response in advance.

Rain had received information that Chandrys was preparing for war almost as soon as it happened. The Empress had begun organizing a large army the moment she had returned from Sunkwool.....and there was no way that it was just a coincidence. In other words, to a degree, he had predicted that Chandrys would invade.

The invasion itself wasn’t something that had exceeded Rain’s predictions by much. It wasn’t strange for that overly-ambitious empress to do something like this. Even after taking her out of the picture, Sunkwool currently had too many weaknesses as it was.

Still, they could not accept the contents of the letter.

Rain thought that they were being shameless.

No normal ruler would simply allow another country to rudely invade their own even if the invaders had said that they would not lay a hand upon them.

“.....Sunkwoll is still my birthplace, even if I’ve lived inside the castle for most of my life. That’s why.....I’m bitter about this land being invaded.”

Shelfa looked down in sorrow, just as Rain had thought she would.

“Yeah. Isn’t it normal to feel that way? But things won’t go as that smug vixen wants it to.”

“You’ve already thought up of something, haven’t you?”

“Well, bits and pieces of something. ——Joe is a smart man.....so this might actually be pretty fun.”

Instead of further explaining himself, he continued,

“still, as long as you’ll allow it, I’d like to end the hostilities from either side with as little fighting as possible for this upcoming battle. I want there to be as little enmity between us as possible.Do you know why?”

Shelfa furrowed her gently sloping brows and gave the matter serious thought, but eventually shook her head no without a word.

“——The reason’s simple. I want Chandrys to fight against Zarmine by our side as our sworn allies by any and all means. We have a greater chance at victory if we get other countries involved than if we try to take Zarmine on alone.”

Shelfa tilted her head to the side in an adorable manner when Rain readily revealed his intentions.

“But Rain, you looked like you didn’t care about forming an alliance at all when we met with Lady Folnier.”

“If that’s what you thought, then it means that I’m quite the actor,”

Rain said with a devilish smile.

He drew Shelfa closer by the shoulder and breathed his cunning words into her ears.

“Listen up, Little one. The most important aspect, or you can even call it the basics, of diplomacy is to sell yourself as high as possible. In this case, even if we wanted to form an alliance with them so badly that it hurt, we couldn’t let them know that. Ideally, we want *them* to be the ones to beg *us* to form an alliance. Then, they can’t take advantage of us, right?”

Shelfa leaned against him after being pulled closer and listened fervently.

Rain gently placed a hand on her cheek and continued,

“I did think we hit jackpot when they brought up the topic of an alliance first. After all, an alliance with Chandrys was a part of my plans regardless. But, even if you had agreed on an alliance with them at that time, the vixen would have ultimately withdrawn her proposal. We probably didn’t look like the most reliable allies at that time no matter how you spin it. In that case, it’d be more convenient for us in the future if we acted first and called off the alliance ourselves, right?”

“——So you acted like you couldn’t have cared less about an alliance on purpose?”

When he nodded, Shelfa looked back at Rain enthusiastically as if she had just witnessed an act of unparalleled genius.

Rain smiled wryly again before he knew it.

This kind of ‘silent diplomacy tactic (as named by Rain)’ was the basics of the basics for Rain, but Shelfa, who was not worldly wise, had interpreted it as profound wisdom.

Still, Rain thought that things were fine as they were.

Machiavellian wiles did not suite her.

It was his job to play the role of the ‘bad guy.’ That was why he nodded lightly and said,

“well, just leave it to me. And, I’d still like your consent before I do anything. Is this plan alright with you? To sum it up.....we’ll wrap up our war with Chandrys with no bad feelings and, on top of that, form an alliance with them?”

Shelfa unhesitatingly nodded in approval.

Rain's plan sounded simple when you put it to words, but most people would have asked if something like that would really work.

However, as usual, Shelfa did not express a single doubt of that nature. She was apparently convinced that Rain would not fail in what he set out to do.

And just then——

Rain cut their conversation short upon hearing faint jeering and listened closer.

When Shelfa looked puzzled, he said,

“do you hear that? Something's going on downstairs.”

“.....I don't hear anything. But if you say so, Rain.”

“——I'm certain of it. Let's go see what's going on; I have a bad feeling about this.”

Rain took Shelfa's hand and briskly exited the room.

Part 2

Ralphus became suspicious when he saw the messengers from Chandrys approaching from the other end of the hallway in a hurry. He had thought that they would still be in an audience with the princess.

So why was the entire group, including the chief envoy, at a place like this instead?

He promptly called out to them, causing the person who was most likely the chief envoy to freeze up at once. Something felt strange to Ralphus.

“Where are you headed, Sir Messenger? Is the audience over already?”

“Yes.....rather, it ended without a hitch,”

the chief envoy said rapidly as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. He continued,

“in any event, we were just about to return to Her Majesty’s side.”

“So soon?”

Ralphus knit his brows.

They had only arrived just this morning. He had thought that they would at least stay the night.

Naturally, Ralphus did not take to Chandrys’ sudden invasion very kindly.

However, that was precisely why he wanted to have a discussion with the messenger that Folnier had sent so that he could use it as an opportunity to investigate their underlying intentions.

Additionally, he had thought that they might be able to find some common ground in between them.

And yet, they were leaving already.

Just what kind of conversation had they held with the princess? Ralphus exceedingly regretted that he had not been able to join in.

Still, the messengers had finished saying what they had to say and were trying to walk away as fast as possible. Or rather, the chief envoy alone seemed like he was strangely in a hurry and his attendants were made to follow along after him.

In any event, Ralphus said,

“please wait a moment! In that case, I’ll at least see you to the castle gates.”

Ralphus obstinately shook his head when the chief envoy tried to refuse him and accompanied them out.

A few of Rain’s subordinates were following behind the messengers, but the ever-diligent Ralphus decided to accompany them personally just in case.

Ralphus immediately noticed that something was abnormal as he exited into the courtyard and approached the castle gates.

A hooded wagon was parked in front of the gates and the gatekeepers were talking to its driver.

From what he could hear, they were arguing over whether the carriage should be let through or not.

“Is something the matter?”

Ralphus called out to them while he was still a distance away.

The two guards on duty saluted him.

The younger of the two answered,

“it’s nothing much, sir. The driver who delivered the vegetables is a different guy from usual. We were trying to confirm his identity. In cases like this, we require that people receive proper authorization from their predecessors. However, this man over there——”

he looked to the driver, who had gotten out of the wagon,

“says that he received his authorization but forgot to bring it with him, so we

were in the middle of letting him know that it wouldn't do."

".....Hmmm."

Ralphus pursed his lips upon hearing about the situation.

It wasn't that he thought there was something wrong in particular, but he informed the messengers to wait for a moment and personally went over to the wagon.

He was not particularly suspicious about anything.

It wasn't unusual for the driver who normally delivered foodstuffs to a castle to swap out with someone else if the original driver was sick or something similar.

Most people would dismiss such complicated regulations regarding the replacement and would not check each individual driver. They would simply wave their hand and let the driver pass.

Thus, it could be said that the gatekeepers were being overly cautious. It was possibly because Rain, the lord of the castle, was surprisingly strict about such matters.

And so, Ralphus, who had an even stronger sense of responsibility than even the gatekeepers, decided to personally verify whether or not there was any danger presented in the situation.

"What's going on?"

he asked the man in question who was simply standing around. Ralphus continued,

"you seem to be a different driver than the person who usually comes; did something happen? Did he get sick or something of the sort?"

He felt that something was off about the other man even as he spoke.

The man had no prominent features and looked docile, but he also seemed apathetic. To put it moderately, he seemed out of it, and to put it plainly, his reactions were somewhat dull.

He looked a little like someone half-lucid who had been deep asleep and was

suddenly slapped awake.

There was a faint haze over his eyes as the man in question turned away from the gatekeepers to face Ralphus.

Sluggishly, he explained,

“yess. Jean caught a little cold. So today, I—”

The man suddenly cut off his words the moment he nonchalantly looked over behind Ralphus.

He suddenly opened his eyes wide.

His creepy eyes, which had become bloodshot red.

He turned to the wagon and suddenly, as if he was cutting through the air, shouted,

“come out! Those guys are our prey!”

Men, who had likely been hiding in the vegetable crates, jumped out of the wagon’s hood with a racket one after another.

Several among them had bows and nocked their arrows.

“Take cover!”

Ralphus instantly turned around and shouted at the messengers from Chandrys.

But, only the chief envoy and one other messenger reacted immediately and took cover, and the rest were directly hit by the arrows and fell down while clawing at their chests.

They died almost instantly.

Then, one of the gatekeepers finally moved as if he had just woken from a dream and blew the emergency whistle.

The other, slightly older guard tried to draw his sword in a panic but was slain by the driver, who had drawn closer.

A naked blade was suddenly hanging from the man’s hand, possibly because he had received it from one of his comrades. Naturally, it needn’t even be said

that all of the men who had jumped out of the wagon were armed.

Each and every one of them was carrying a weapon as they ran toward the surviving messengers.

In addition, the men who had fired arrows were preparing for a second round.

They had prepared a two-staged attack.

Ralphus didn't know whose idea it had been, but regardless, the attackers wanted the messengers dead.

They probably did not expect to return alive.

"I will not let you!"

Ralphus had not been armed because he was within the castle's premises. Still, he instantly picked up the fallen gatekeeper's sword and fought back.

He stepped in and brandished his sword against the enemies who were about to fire arrows. Without sparing even a glance at those who had erupted into a spray of blood upon having their throats slashed, he indiscriminately swung his sword at multiple enemies at once.

Screams rose and blood spewed. Ralphus did not allow his enemies the leisure to escape and they were not able to put up much of a resistance either. Ralphus' sword mowed down or pierced through his enemies' torsos as easily as if he had been cutting grass. The men who had initially jumped out of the wagon had no choice but to die as Ralphus' sword hit their vitals.

Normally, Ralphus was a man who was never seen without a smile on his face and never forgot to show his consideration to even the lowliest of soldiers. However, that was not the entirety of his nature.

Right now, Ralphus was exhibiting his forte as a warrior as he slew the men with bows in the blink of an eye.

He immediately twisted his body and chased down the driver and the other men who were pursuing the messengers.

He clicked his tongue before he knew it.

The two surviving messengers from Chandrys were standing in a daze. The

younger gatekeeper ran to stand in front of them and block them from their pursuers, gallantly trying to fulfil his professional duties.

More guards, who had heard the whistle, were running toward them with a hand on the swords at their waists. Things would become more advantageous for them if he held his ground.

In any event, there were only seven~eight enemies remaining.

“Run!”

Ralphus shouted at him as he ran.

It was the most advantageous move to make in this occasion. Their attackers would have fewer cards to play if they made it inside the castle.

He couldn't let the messengers from Chandrys die here.

The gatekeeper was taken aback upon hearing Ralphus' rebuke. Still, he soon nodded and urged the messengers to run.

The chief envoy did not remain in a daze this time. He, along with the other remaining messenger, ran to join up with the guards coming up from behind them.

That the messengers had not chosen to fight for their honor——was the silver lining amidst all of these unfortunate events.

It was thanks to this that Ralphus, who was behind the attackers, was somehow able to calm down.

He purposefully swung his sword with a loud yell in order to draw attention to himself. He brought down his sword without mercy.

He slashed one across the back and sank the other into a sea of blood as he drew his sword back.

The attackers unexpectedly did what Ralphus wanted them to as he efficiently cut down their numbers.

They turned around all at once and attacked him with their swords at ready. Only the man who had pretended to be a driver had not. Instead, he accelerated drastically and swung down his sword at the surviving messengers.

The powerful sound of the sword cutting through the wind reached even Ralphus' ears.

The man was terrifyingly strong. He had clearly surpassed the limits of a normal human being. The vice envoy, who had been split in two from his head to somewhere around his stomach, sank down to the ground twitching.

The blood that erupted from his body dyed the earth red.

"Ginnam!"

The chief envoy, who was finally the last one left, heartbrokenly cried out his colleague's name. *Damn you!* he screamed as he tried to turn back around, perhaps because his anger had driven away his fear.

Stop! Ralphus yelled.

His warrior's intuition had told him that the fake driver wasn't normal.

Ralphus' fortune continued yet.

A flood of guards had rushed the fake driver before the one-on-one duel that Ralphus feared could come to pass.

They promptly formed a wall between the fake driver, who had raised his sword again, and the surviving chief envoy.

"Don't kill him!"

Ralphus yelled once more as he wielded his sword freely in every direction. They had to determine who's orders the man was working under.

However, that was easier said than done.

"Gaaaaaaaah!"

The fake driver suddenly roared a beastly howl.

It was so beastly and raw that it was impossible to believe that it had come from human vocal cords, and caused the guards, who had been attacking the fake driver all at once, to stop dead in their tracks.

The man's muscles began to ripple and swell in a creepy manner. His bulging jacket increased in volume before their eyes until it finally burst apart, buttons and all.

The man continued to roar his beastly howl throughout the entire process.

The changes to his body did not stop at his muscles.

Bristles grew from places where his skin was exposed, like his face and arms, and he transformed into something inhuman and reminiscent of an ogre.

“You, you monster!”

someone who had been watching with their eyes bulging cried out sharply and brandished their sword to rush the fake driver.

The rest of the guards followed along at once and jumped the creepy man. The fake driver, who was simply standing there, was promptly attacked by swords all over his body.

However—

The fake driver had been more of a monster than the guards had ever imagined.

Their swords, which they had swung with all of their might, had been repelled by the man’s thick layer of muscle, and the tips of their swords were stopped after only giving the man a few scratches even when they pressed the full weight of their bodies against their blades.

The guards stopped attacking for a moment, knowing that their freely wielded swords were to no effect.

They attempted to fall back as they shared chilly expressions with one another.

Glare.

The beastman glared at them with his large eyes.

“Gwooooooooooooooh!”

he roared and chased after the guards.

He swung his large sword sideways with such ferocity that it was barely a blur. Two heads flew with just one swing.

He attacked left and right, leaving everything to brute power while ignoring defense from the onset. Still, his speed and muscular strength were far beyond

ordinary, and the heads and torsos of unfortunate guards flew and were rent every time he swung his sword.

None of the guards were cowards, but their barely existent flames of courage extinguished naturally in the face of an opponent before whom they were utterly powerless.

All of them tried to crawl away from the monster. Even the guards who had arrived late as reinforcements stopped in their tracks with pallid faces, unwilling to get any closer.

“Gaah!”

The monster suddenly turned around.

He had found the chief envoy from Chandrys, who was still trying to run away.

“Hold!”

Ralphus’ stern cry reached the monster’s back as he tried to chase after the chief envoy. The tone of Ralphus’ voice had been so sharp and firm that even the fake driver, who had turned into a beastman, had listened.

Ralphus cut down the final attacker who had been trying to block his path and pursued after the beastman.

He already had his sword at the ready by the time the beastman had turned to him.

Ralphus pierced the monster’s eye with a loud cry to boost his fighting spirit. As Ralphus had thought, the monster’s eye could not repel the blade and the monster roared a blood-curling roar as fresh blood spilled from the wound.

Ralphus pulled out his sword and went in to attack the other eye without a moment’s delay but was blocked by the beastman’s thick and hairy arm. The beastman’s skin was tougher than even a real ogre’s, and like the guards, Ralphus could not cut through it. And his sword had been repelled with such ridiculous strength, too!

Ralphus bit his lip.

This sword won’t do.

It would only work on the monster's eyes, and it would be difficult to reach the monster's face now that it was on its guard.

On the contrary, it already took Ralphus everything he had just to avoid the large sword that the pseudo-ogre was swinging around.

"Gaaaah!"

"Kugh!"

Having failed to fully dodge the monster's lunge, Ralphus fell. Then, the monster's large foot rose to try to stomp on him. Ralphus rolled and somehow managed to escape and back away.

"Boss, you good?!"

Gwen's voice echoed from somewhere.

Evidently, he had noticed the commotion.

At some point, the fight had moved from the castle gates to deeper inside the castle grounds.

"——! Here, take this!"

Ralphus perfectly caught Justice, which Gwen had thrown across the distance to Ralphus with his herculean strength as he ran. Then, Ralphus turned back to the fake driver, who had been on the verge of charging at him, and drew his sword, throwing the scabbard aside.

Swish! ——Bzzzzzzzzzt

He swung the radiant crimson sword diagonally upward. Drops of blood followed after the sword as it drew a vibrant arc of red light.

Even the monster's tough skin could not block an attack from a magic sword, which had been imbued with magic. He had avoided a direct hit by promptly twisting his upper body, but a shallow wound still opened across his stomach and chest.

It had been a far cry from a fatal wound, but the monster still cautiously leapt

backward. Then, Gwen and Nigel ran forward to stand by Ralphus' sides.

Evidently, the monster still retained his intelligence.

The monster's remaining yellow eye darted here and there, likely because he had discerned that the tides had turned against him.

"Uweh. What's the deal with him?"

Gwen spat and readied his gigantic battle axe. Nigel had already long since drawn his sword.

"An ogre.....but its physique's a little too small. And its face looks human,"

Nigel calmly pointed out.

With his eyes still glued on the monster, Ralphus replied,

"an ogre wouldn't have appeared this close to town. He was a normal human until just a little moment ago. He suddenly transformed."

"He suddenly transformed? What's with that?"

Gwen asked. He continued,

"is he some kinda vampire? But he sure as hell don't look like one."

"He probably a beast master's servant."

His brazenly composed voice sounded no different than it always did.

Ralphus turned around to see Rain looking calmly over them with a surprised Princess Shelfa by his side. "Yo," said Rain while he raised a hand, as if they as had met within the palace as usual.

With his eyes fixed on the monster, Rain said,

"I fought with one a bit once during my travels a long time ago. There are these masters who implant their 'species' into people. Then, that person gets reduced to being the master's servant. In exchange for a little bit of the 'master's' power. Well, they're not as tough as vampires anyhow."

Rain cut off his words for a moment and observed the monster closely with

his black eyes. He continued, “hmmm. He’s probably a ‘servant’ who had some other species implanted inside of him. If he was the master, he would’ve been a bit bigger and a lot stronger.”

After making his conclusion, Rain added,

“.....he’s lacking in speed because he relies too much on his muscles and the sturdiness of his body. And the muscular strength that he’s been so proud of isn’t much to write home about either. I’d give it a thirty-five at most.”

After assigning the monster an arbitrary point value, he finally asked Ralphus,

“you alright?”

“I’m fine. But, according to what you just said, wouldn’t he be strong enough to be the ‘master’?”

Ralphus shook his head and continued,

“this was my mistake..... I let all of the messengers from Chandrys, save the chief envoy, die.”

“You have a bad habit of making everything your fault.”

Ralphus’ friend thoroughly sounded as if he thought that nothing was wrong. Rain continued,

“for starters, you protected at least one, so isn’t it fine? By your logic, I’m the one who has more responsibility over what happened. Since I only posted guards inside the castle building.”

It was Rain’s bad habit that he all too frankly added, “but I don’t mind one bit,” at the end.

The chief envoy from Chandrys, who was now surrounded by a sizeable number of guards, had an unspeakably complicated look on his face upon hearing Rain’s words.

Then, the ‘servant’ in question who had ignored the conversation around him glared at Rain and readily stepped forward. It was as if he had suddenly lost his obsession with killing the messenger and his interests had moved to Rain in the messenger’s stead.

In a grating, unseemly voice, he said,

“are you Rain? My Master told me about you. No, from the start, my true mission was to fight you.”

“Oho. So I guess you’re from that mysterious organization. You’re gonna be my opponent?”

Rain flashed a grin.

Ralphus had seen him grin like that numerous time before.

“Sure. I’ll take you on, just like you want.”

Just like that, Rain casually walked toward the servant to close the distance between them.

By then, Rain’s three aides, starting with Leni, finally came running, but Rain pointed them to the princess instead.

“I’ll trust the Princess and the messenger to you guys.”

“Un, understood!”

Leni answered right away before Gazaram could say anything. That he preferred to guard the princess over fighting was written plainly on his face.

Senoa and Gazaram felt as if they had been dragged alongside Leni. Still, they probably obeyed their orders because they did not doubt that their liege would win certain victory.

Suddenly, the servant roared.

The roar had been so abrupt that knights, starting with Ralphus, sharply brought up their swords again. The servant roared a deep, long roar that was far more ferocious than he had previously.

Once again, his bestial transformation progressed for all to see.

Stiff bristles grew even on his face this time, making him look like a hairy bear. His muscles swelled again and rippled uncomfortably. The creaking noises that

his muscles made reached even Ralphus' ears. He was probably stronger than an ogre in terms of pure strength.

His jacket had long since been reduced to rags, and now his pants began to expand as well.

His second transformation had completed at the same time that he had stopped howling. Standing before them was a beast that had completely deviated from humanity, which they had never seen before.

He still resembled closest to an ogre, but his face and limbs still looked somewhat human, causing Ralphus to feel psychologically repulsed just by looking at him.

Ralphus was apparently not alone in his sentiment as Selphie and Yuri, who had come running out of the castle building, both screamed magnificently.

The servant glared at Rain as if that had been his signal.

He glared with both his eyes as the eye that Ralphus had taken pains to destroy had regenerated at some point.

“Whoa~”

Rain clapped his hands.

He did not look the slightest bit nervous as he apathetically brought his hands together in applause.

He was the only one who stood straight with a sarcastic smile despite that there were many among the soldiers who were trembling in their boots.

It was as if he had left behind his fear and panic in his mother's womb.

“To think you'd be able to transform twice; you've put a lot of thought into this. I'll add on another five points and make it forty.”

“.....Prattle on while you can. You'll end up getting ripped to shreds by me anyway.”

“Quit bragging, you big ball of fur,”

Rain sneered. He continued,

“I guess you don’t even know why your master ordered you to attack me. Well, that’s how it usually is for underlings.”

“My Master believes that the likes of you isn’t worth the effort.”

“You’re wrong. Your master wanted to use you to test how strong I am before fighting me. If they were sure they could win, they would’ve just come in person. Now, I wanna ask you something too. Were you changed against your will? Or did you want this for yourself?”

“Obviously, I wanted this for myself.”

The servant stuck out his chest as he said his grating words. He continued, “nobody makes a fool of me anymore. Not a single one!”

The beastman laughed loudly in dark satisfaction, though no one else knew the story of his past and how it had led to his becoming this way.

Then, he swung his large sword and rushed at Rain the moment he stopped laughing. Rain initially put his hand on the hilt of his magic sword, but he reconsidered his actions and let go. He twisted his body and kicked the servant’s wrist the instant the latter appeared before his eyes. It connected cleanly. The sword flew out of the servant’s thick and hairy hand.

However, the enemy did not fall into a daze upon losing his weapon.

“Gaaaah!”

The servant immediately tipped back the scales and grabbed at Rain with both hands.

The black-clad Rain and the pseudo-ogre servant were locked against each other hand in hand.

If anything, Rain’s hands were on the larger side, but his hands looked terribly small in comparison to the enemy’s and they were completely hidden away by the enemy’s palms.

The servant, who was taller than even Rain, forcefully increased his output of strength in order to attack Rain from above.

Ralphus tried to jump in and assist Rain upon seeing that, but he changed his

mind after seeing the expression on his friend's face. Rain was smiling brazenly even as he clashed in a contest of strength against the servant.

"What's wrong? Put a bit more spirit and power into it, will you?! Your beloved muscles are crying!"

Rain challenged the servant, his countenance still as composed as ever.

It was hard to tell because of his thick fur, but the ogre-like servant was astonished. He had been planning to force Rain down, but was being pushed back by Rain instead and his giant knee was about to buckle.

"Pre, preposterous!"

"Do you really think you can beat a dragon in a contest of strength? 'Cause that's exactly what you're trying to do right now,"

Rain pointed out in a level voice.

Turmoil visibly ran through the servant's visage.

"——Impossible! Master said that it was just a rumor!"

"Well, your morale would've plummeted if they told you the truth. It would've been inconvenient in testing me out, even if you can't go against your orders. Your master used you as they pleased."

Rain abruptly looked up after he finished whispering his piece.



He shook his head a little at his enemy, whose breathing had grown haggard.

“I can tell. You aren’t a match for me.If you’re gonna resent someone, resent the master who used you as an experiment.”

“Lies! Dragon Slayers can’t possibly exist!”

Contrary to his words, the servant was already sure of the truth.

Vivid fear colored his face at the last moment as the servant shook off Rain’s hands and attempted to flee.

For a moment, it had looked like he had made a successful escape.

But a dull sound reverberated in the next.

The servant opened his large eyes wide.

Rain had pierced through the chest of his fleeing enemy with his hand with extreme ease. He had effortlessly penetrated through the servant’s tough chest and his bright red hand stuck through the servant’s back.

The ground rumbled as servant collapsed to the ground the moment that Rain withdrew his hand. There wasn’t even a need to confirm that he was dead.

Whooooa!?

The castle guards, who had gathered one after another, let out a loud cheer when they saw that the match had been decided. Rain lightly raised his hand to answer to their cheers, but he didn’t seem all that happy for it.

“As expected of you,”

Ralphus said, despite knowing that his friend was not too excited.

“Nah, beating the likes of him isn’t something to be proud of. It would’ve been better if the beast master had come in person instead.”

“So like I’d thought, was he really from the same organization as the girl named Talma?”

“Probably. Like the guy said himself, his main goal was to test out my strength, and the scheme to provoke discord between Chandrys and Sunkwoll was an added bonus. Still, they’re a bunch of shameless jerks, what with all they’re doing.”

“Indeed. But the fact that he——”

Ralphus cast his gaze at the noisy crowd of soldiers that had circled around the corpse,

“wasn’t sent from Zarmine is a silver lining amidst all of these unfortunate events. I suppose they’re still busy reorganizing their army.”

“King Leygur wouldn’t do something this pointless. I think that Talma’s gang doesn’t have a clear grasp of our military strength yet. And they’re underestimating me in particular.”

“You can’t blame them for their disbelief. Though I understand that you don’t want to fight weak foes.”

He pat Rain on the shoulder in an attempt to console him.

Then, the sole surviving messenger from Chandrys approached them.

He bowed his head to Rain and Ralphus in a surprisingly polite manner.

“I suppose I must give you my thanks. In any case, you saved my life.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Rain returned to his usual mood and flashed a grin. He continued,

“it’d be inconvenient for us if you’d died.”

“.....Yes?”

“Don’t sweat it, I was talking to myself.”

Rain swiftly exchanged a glance with the princess who stood beside him. As far as Ralphus could tell, there was something going on between them. Rain continued, “well, that aside. Marvelously enough, my threat from before came true. It’s dangerous, so I’ll have you escorted to the unit that’s waiting for you.”

“H, how did you know that we had troops on standby?”

Sweat slowly but steadily began to form on the messenger's forehead.

Nonchalantly, Rain said,

“that furball from earlier would've killed you guys somewhere where it was easier to do it if you guys had been few in number to begin with. He would've wiped you guys out first before coming here. The reason that he couldn't was because you had a bunch of guards accompanying you. It was better to attack us here where both of us would be present if it was gonna be dangerous either way. In any case, he had a better chance of killing at least one of us if he took us by surprise.”

The messenger had no words to say.

Since their conversation had wrapped up, Rain briskly ordered his three aides to compose an escort unit.

The messenger would more or less be able to return to Folnier with this.

Still, they wouldn't be able to avoid fighting with Chandrys just because they had saved the messenger's life.

Ralphus did not know what kind of response the messenger would be carrying back, but he knew that, ultimately, conflict could not be avoided.....

The signs of war were closing in on the kingdom once more.

Ralphus was certain of this.

The disturbance from noon had died down and the castle had regained its tranquility by the small hours of the morning.

Ralphus had been making himself at home in the room that he had been provided when Nigel, his aide, paid him a visit.

It was a terribly rare occurrence.

Unlike Gwen, who would drop by even when he didn't need anything, Nigel, while still loyal, was not the type of person to visit his liege's room just for fun.

“What is it? Is there a problem?”

Ralphus asked, steeling himself a little as he offered Nigel a chair and poured

him some wine from the North.

After all, in his experience, Nigel only sought a discussion with him when something troubling was going on and the like.

“I wouldn’t really call it a problem.The reason I visited you today has to do with Sir Rain.”

“Rain? What about him?”

Nigel rocked the glass in his hand and fell into a contemplative silence. He seemed hesitant on whether or not he should speak his mind—yet another rare occurrence.

A faint trace of distress appeared on his handsome visage.

After finally making up his mind, he gulped down his wine all at once and spoke.

“You were once the authority of Sunkwool, Lord Ralphus. However, Sir Rain’s voice has grown more influential ever since Her Highness Princess Shelfa’s reign began. From what I’ve heard, our fundamental plan of action for the Chandrys war was finalized and offered to the Princess by Sir Rain. If it had been King Douglas, he would have asked for your opinion first, Lord Ralphus.”

Ralphus stared long and hard at his trusted aide. Nigel did not meet his gaze, as if he was avoiding Ralphus on purpose.

Instead, Nigel stared stubbornly into the center of his glass.

“It’s not that I dislike Sir Rain. The fact that he’s very broadminded and overflowing with ambition isn’t something that he should be ashamed of as a knight. Likewise, I don’t think that Her Highness had any particularly ill intentions for appointing Sir Rain to a position of responsibility. But at the end of the day, I’m your retainer, Lord Ralphus. I can’t turn a blind eye when the liege I respect gets ignored like that!”

It was the first time in Ralphus’ memories that the ever-reticent Nigel had spent so many words in such a fit of passion. Nigel’s cheeks were slightly red. He had apparently been longing to say this for a while.

Ralphus made an effort not to provoke his aide any further as he calmly said,

“so is this what you’re trying to say? That.....Rain is a man of many schemes, and ultimately, he’s planning on using us as chess pieces to accomplish his own desires?”

Nigel nodded slightly when Ralphus spelled it out.

He finally looked Ralphus in the eyes.

“I don’t believe that he’s a bad person. Still, he’s too sharp, and much too strong. He might even be aiming for the throne one day..... Am I simply imaging things to be worried about him?”

“You’re unusually talkative today, Nigel.”

Ralphus smiled, and without letting that smile fade from his face, he continued,

“I personally don’t mind even if that’s what he plans to do.”

“——! Lord Ralphus!”

“Wait. I still have more to say.I don’t mind, but I doubt that he’d ever want the throne even if it’s the last thing he does. He’d likely leave the kingdom if someone tried to force the throne on him. That much is as clear as day to me.”

When his aide looked all the more unconvinced, Ralphus gently admonished him, saying,

“you don’t have to understand him, but I want you to trust him. I want you to trust my friend as you trust me. Deep down, contrary to what he says, Rain isn’t the type of person to care about money or prestige. What he’s after isn’t something of that nature.....probably.”

“Then, do you mean to say that my worries are unfounded?”

“I do,”

Ralphus declared.

He smiled and prefaced his next words, saying, “it’s not something you’ll ever

hear him say,” and continued, “but I can tell. He doesn’t have any underlying ambitions. He does want to support Her Highness, but he doesn’t want any power or authority for himself. He only appears ambitious because he pretends to be that way.”

Nigel fell silent once again and stared fixatedly at Ralphus.

Ralphus silently accepted his gaze and nodded. Eventually, Nigel let out a sigh.

“.....You’re good at seeing people for who they really are, Lord Ralphus. I’ve seen many examples of your skill firsthand, so I suppose all I can do is trust your judgement on this despite how doubtful I am.”

“Hey now.”

Ralphus smiled wryly.

Still, at the very least, Nigel looked like he felt a little better than he had when he first walked into the room.

“Understood. If you trust him, Lord Ralphus, I’ll trust him as well and see how things go in the long term. I’ll clear away my baseless suspicions of him.”

“Please do.”

Ralphus gave Nigel a hefty nod and reached out to pour him another glass of wine.

Their kingdom, or rather, their group that was centered around Princess Shelfa, was to face a mighty foe with only what little power they had.

At the very least, I want to stabilize the sense of unity between us as allies..... thought Ralphus.

Chapter 5: The Melancholy of Joe Lamberck

Part 1

Safir Dalmanac Fostier took pride in the fact that he was a high general and vainly believed that he had the ability to back it up.

He had simply not felt the need to show off his abilities until now, but he was more than capable of getting things done when he wanted to— —or so he thought.

Yet, he was honest enough to secretly admit that ‘there are still people who are better at warfare than me.’

In all honesty, Safir’s military records could not be called befitting of his station even sycophantically and he would have never held the office of high general if not for the noble cause granted to him by his lineage.

Safir understood all of this, if subconsciously. He would still stubbornly deny it if someone singled him out and told him he was ‘useless on the battlefield,’ of course.

Besides, it wasn’t as if the other high generals could be said to be talented either. Rain and Ralphus were the exceptions to the case. Well, in addition to those two, Ganoa, who had betrayed them in the previous war, had occasionally distinguished himself in war as well, but his methods for victory had generally been so underhanded that only King Douglas had seen any merit in them.

In any event, Safir was neither particularly weak nor particularly incompetent in comparison to his former colleagues. He would be evaluated as just barely

average among the nobles. And so, these truths did not really trigger any feelings of inferiority in Safir.

Besides, Safir did not think to 'step back to safety' just because he internally accepted the fact that he was 'weak at warfare.'

If he was bad at war, then he simply had to entrust the job to someone who was good at it. After all, that was what authority and economic wealth was for, was it not?

The treasures in the castle storehouse had been whisked clean away, but that wealth had originally belonged to someone else and his personal fortune still remained intact.

In addition, his former comrades would offer him funds even if he didn't do anything anyway. They were all considering what would come next after the princess was overthrown.

——And so.

Safir, who now sat at the head of all the nobles, had taken measures to bring down the iron hammer of justice (or so he believed) on Rain and his group, who had stolen away the princess.

In other words, he had exercised his authority to headhunt a man who seemed to be good at war from among his comrades.

That man was a man named Ludic.

This forty-year-old moody and nervous-looking man was the 'man to use in war' whom Safir had found.

Ludic had served as a centurion during the war against their once longtime enemy, Lunan, and had consistently delivered results whenever he had been deployed.

He was a noble and he was good at war——Ludic had stood out from his peers when Safir had combed through his allies.

Safir had wasted no time inviting him to the castle and making Ludic his retainer. If Ludic achieved good results in war, it would translate to Safir's

accomplishments as Ludic's liege.

Safir had done well for himself up until that point, but the same could not be said for his actions afterward.

Safir allowed himself to relax after a job well done and, thinking his upcoming battles were already as good as won, indulged himself in celebratory banquets every day and night since.

Long story short, he was busy fooling around.

On the other hand, Ludic, who had been promoted from a centurion to a brigadier, was naturally overjoyed. His family ranked among the middle ranks of Sunkwoll nobility, and he hadn't expected to have been able to advance any further in life than he already had.

And yet, he was now a brigadier.....which meant that he was technically a general and that the seat of high general would be within his reach after one more step. Ludic wasn't a particularly ambitious man, but he was still happy to be able to go far in life.

His beautiful wife and two beloved children had been overjoyed as well.

Thus, Ludic, the new brigadier, was incredibly eager to reorganize the army.

——Or he had been at first, at least.

Ludic's enthusiasm declined day by day ever since he had taken up his new post. He had been endowed with a little bit (though, only a little) of common sense even as a noble, and could not understand why his superiors, starting with Safir, indulged only in their festivities nonstop.

Safir had been more useless than a scrawny horse. Ludic's superiors had pushed all of the menial tasks on to him while all they did was horse around.

By the time that Ludic had managed to reorganize the noble armies that had gathered from various territories across the kingdom, he received word of Chandrys' invasion from a fast horse.

He had been shocked upon receiving the report.

He had not thought in his wildest dreams that Chandrys would invade even despite the discourtesy that had been shown to them the other day.

Incidentally, Rain's group had known about the invasion long before the enemy had broken through the border, but Ludic only learned of it after the fact.

They were much too ill-prepared, even after taking into consideration the fact that Fournier hadn't sent them a messenger with a declaration of war. It showed just how much the nobles had been slacking off.

In any case, at this time, Ludic was the only person in Safir's faction who had an accurate grasp on just how grave the situation truly was.

"Is His Majesty present?!"

Ludic asked the guards as he jogged through the corridor with bloodshot eyes.

The two guards who had been diligently performing their duties in front of Safir's bedchambers exchanged looks as they said, "he is, but now isn't the best time."

"He's only just gotten up."

"You idiots!"

Even Ludic, who hardly ever raised his voice, could not help but thunder.

He released all of his pent-up dissatisfaction at the two guards who stumbled back in surprise.

"What time do you think it is?! It's already noon. It's not the time to be

sleeping in without a care in the world! I'm here because of a state emergency! Stop grumbling at me about trivial matters and announce my arrival!"

He pushed aside the guards, who were both blabbering something about how they couldn't do that even if he was a brigadier, and put his hands on the door.

It wasn't the time to hold back anymore.

He pulled open the door with brute strength.

The middle-aged knight's lean figure was instantly assaulted with a humid heat and the thick stench of sweat.

Safir was lying down stark naked on top of a vast, canopied bed that was so large that one could have held a ball on it. He was in a great mood as he flirted with three young women who were serving him.

Astonishingly, the self-made king had yet to notice that Ludic was there. He fingered the white bodies that he held in both his arms with an oily and sweaty face that displayed his lust for all to see.

But, the women who had served Safir through the night had obviously noticed Ludic's presence and were trying to hide their bodies under the blankets in a panic.

"Hey now! Why are you hiding, hmm? You girls better hurry up and do what I say."

"But Y, Your Majesty! Over there....."

"Over there? What's over there? There now, stop being silly and do what I ordered you to do."

Blood rushed into Ludic's head upon hearing their foolish conversation.

He slammed the door shut as hard as he could and yelled loudly in rebuke.

"Your Majestyyyyy———!!"

"Eek!"

Safir finally looked to the door with a strange yelp. At first, he confirmed who it was with lethargic eyes and then grew angry upon learning it was Ludic.

"H, how dare you?! I'll have you decapitated for spying on your liege lord's

pleasures.”

“Sunkwoll is about to fall!!”

Ludic interrupted Safir, his liege, despite that doing so was something that would normally have never been allowed. His words acted as a lance to seal away Safir’s complaints.

He reported on the situation without a moment’s delay as soon as Safir was startled into silence.

Safir of course, but even the girls who were huddling close together grew pale as they heard Ludic’s report.

Upon a closer look, all three girls looked similar and had similar physiques. They all had long, uncurled blonde hair and large eyes set into their slender faces.

Ludic felt like they reminded him of someone, and then the answer to his question reflexively flashed into his mind.

Indeed, all three girls looked like Princess Shelfa.

However, they were only similar enough that Ludic would say that they might look similar only if he absolutely *had* to, and on further inspection the difference between the girls and Princess Shelfa was like the difference between candlelight and the sun.

It wasn’t only because of their respective beauties, but likely because a certain “something” that exuded from within Shelfa made her definitively different from the three girls before him.

Ludic had only caught a glimpse of the princess just moments before she absconded, but the difference between her and the three girls was all too clear to him.

He can’t help but want her even if he knows he can’t have her.....is that how it is?

Ludic concluded, feeling all the more disgusted about it.

All things regardless, isn't he much too obsessed with the princess? It's like his soul was stolen away by her unrivaled beauty. A king shouldn't be having his heart stolen by mere women!

Ludic could have still understood it if Safir had wanted the princess in order to justify his authority as a king.

It would have been the type of political maneuver that happened in any country. However, no matter how he looked at it, Ludic felt like his young lord was putting politics second and only wanted the princess to satisfy his own lust.

In short, Safir wanted to do the things he was doing to those girls to the actual princess.

That was what Safir probably wanted deep down, despite what he usually broadcasted as his public stance. Safir finally broke out of his stupor while Ludic was quickly thinking through all of this while stacking on a large chunk of demerits against his liege in his mind.

The first thing out of his mouth was,

“wh, why is Chandrys doing this?”

“.....Wouldn't you have a better idea than me, Your Majesty?”

“Preposterous!”

A stunning volume of spit flew out of his mouth. Safir continued,

“I only tried to restrain them a bit to investigate them!

“Is that really something to get angry enough about to invade another country?! Who'd go that far, normally? How can she be so petty for someone who calls herself an empress?!”

Would you have simply smiled and forgiven her if you were in her shoes?!

Ludic held back what he truly wanted to say and indifferently continued,

“there's no point in worrying about that at this point. Right now, our first priority should be to think about how we can win.”

“C, can we win?!”

Safir looked imploringly at Ludic.

However, that question was one that Ludic had wanted to ask for himself.

Besides, isn't it much too cowardly for a liege to be trembling stark naked like this?

Ludic scowled and deliberately said his next words in a stronger tone.

“I wouldn't know that. Still, in any case, I plan on doing everything we can. —But, please have these women restrained before we discuss this any further. It'd cause trouble if the masses knew about the invasion. Even if the news will get out eventually, it's better to hold it off for as long as we can.”

“Urk..... These girls here?”

Safir cast a stubborn side-eye at the girls. They were holding each other and quivering upon hearing the brigadier's unexpected words. They implored Safir with their eyes. Safir continued, “I had to search through all of my comrades within the nobility before I finally found girls who looked like—ah, no, never mind. In, in any event, I'm quite fond of these girls.”

“Your Majesty! What you need right now isn't women but a war council!”

Ludic raised his voice. He continued,

“I will offer you any beauty you desire once your imperial reign is stabilized, Your Majesty. Please be patient until then.”

“Any beauty I desire.....even Princess Shelfa herself?”

Safir readily disclosed his true feelings.

Hell if I cared!

Ludic wanted to say but managed to keep silent.

The truth of the matter was that, in order for him to have the princess, they would have to defeat not only Chandrys but Rain's group as well.

Even if they ignored the possibility of reaching a mutual agreement and tried to power through them, it was currently a near-impossible feat.

However, Safir should have been aware of this as well.

——And yet, as soon as Ludic gave his consent, Safir immediately looked relaxed and was suddenly in high spirits.

“I see! Then we’ll hold a war council at once. ——But first, I need to have these girls moved to another room. Now, girls, I’ll make sure to let you out later, so just bear with it for now.”

Ludic stopped Safir in a hurry before the latter could call out loudly to the guards outside.

“Your Majesty, you must first have these women put on some clothes!”

“Y, you’re right. Oh, and I still need to get dressed as well. Hahaha.....haha.”

Safir laughed wryly in an attempt to hide his feelings and restlessly began to clothe himself. Ludic had no intention of seeing his master’s naked body or to watching the women put on clothes so he silently turned his back to them.

And then, he softly let out a sigh.

The final pillar of support for a knight fighting on the battlefield was not his family, but none other than the liege he served. It had to do with a knight’s pride.

Will I be able to look up to this person as my liege and fight for him until my very last breath?

“By the way, Ludic.”

Safir spoke while Ludic had his back turned to him in distress. He continued,

“how have things been after you became a brigadier.....no, a general? Is everyone obeying your orders?”

“.....It’s been difficult. I was originally merely a viscount. There are many nobles serving under me, and they haven’t taken too kindly to me.”

“What, a viscount you say? I see, is that what it was.....? Hmph, then for the time being, I’ll raise your standing to that of an earl. Make sure you keep working hard!”

Safir had finished putting on white riding pants by then and had recovered much of his composure.

In addition, he had also regained the air of arrogance he always wore. A smug smile alighted his visage.

Ludic reflexively said his thanks and was suddenly struck by the impulse to laugh out loud.

Psychologically, he's just a selfish child.

He doesn't understand how the world works, or how people work. And he doesn't even try to learn.

Evidently, Rain had recently welcomed an aged hero that he had only met once or twice before as his aide all of a sudden. He apparently made other such exceptional promotions quite often.



But, as frustrating as it was, the value of Rain and Safir's actions were completely different even if the actions in question had been the same. Ludic didn't want to appreciate his enemy, but the facts were the facts.

Rain already had the qualities of a general in his person. On top of that, he also had the insight to judge people's talents and the generosity to act on it.

That was why he had the ability to make such exceptional promotions and had actually exercised it.

However, Safir was a different story.

He had simply brought out a bigger bait in order to make Ludic work the way he wanted him to.

He did not seriously acknowledge or respect Ludic's abilities. *Ludic seems like someone who's skilled at war, so I'll make use of him. I don't care about what happens next.* That was what Safir probably thought.

He thought that the world revolved around money and status and that he could move the world as he wished as long as he had both.

But then, he would never be able to earn true respect from sensible retainers.

Although he was a noble, Ludic had interacted to some extent with the knights under him who were common-born. The popularity that he gained in doing so was what had led to his past results in war. Additionally, he personally did not lead a particularly luxurious lifestyle.

Rather, from his fellow nobles' point of view, he lived a frightfully modest life.

That was probably why—he felt antipathy at Safir's truly noble-like manner of handling things.

He was deeply disappointed instead of happy despite the fact that Safir had raised his rank in court.

Joe Lamberck, the person who actually led the Chandrys army, was seized by a quiet sense of anxiety after invading into Sunkwoll.

However, it wasn't because there had been some sort of hindrance to their advance or anything of the sort.

Rather, it was the opposite.

Things had been going so smoothly ever since they had left the fortress by the border that it was as if they were traversing through an uninhabited land. No one stopped them on their path and no messenger of affliction had appeared before them. Even the weather had been continuously clear, as if it was blessing their journey ahead. It was as easy as simply taking a stroll through the area.

Morale among the troops was high, and everyone thought that no other general commanding an invading army was as blessed to be in the position than Joe.

Joe, however, was not happy about the situation but rather grew all the warier.

It was because Rain, who had yet to make any movements, was consistently weighing on his mind. He had made arrangements to uncover any movements Rain would make, of course. He had sent out several spies before they had passed the border to that effect. However.....none of them had returned despite the amount of time that had passed since.

This was yet another matter that cast a dark shadow over Joe's heart.

".....After all, he's a man who doesn't easily fit into any established patterns of behavior."

Joe crossed his arms as he sat alone in his large tent on the campground.

In his hands was the official reply that Princess Shelfa had sent them the other day. It was.....how should he put it, a truly novel reply.

First of all, there was not a single letter written on it despite what it was.

Instead, there was a portrait that covered the entire sheet of paper.

It depicted a daring man with black hair sneering with his tongue out as far as it would go. Incidentally, Rain had likely been the model for this picture. He had probably drawn it as well. Joe couldn't say that it was any good, but he did acknowledge that it used strong brush strokes.

Joe had stared seriously at the portrait within the reply wondering whether there was 'a deeper meaning to the picture,' but then smiled wryly upon realizing how foolish he must have looked.

There was no deeper meaning to the reply.

Nevertheless, according to the messenger who had returned, Rain had been attacked by a mysterious group, causing Joe to wonder if Rain was dealing with some other problem as well.

He had spared no details in receiving a summary of the attack, but the thought that someone would try to kill their messengers along with Rain was frankly both insane and a little suspicious.

".....But more importantly, I have to worry about things on our end first."

Joe tossed the ridiculous picture off to the side and sighed.

Then, he heard someone calling him from outside.

"Come in."

A knight timidly pulled aside the tent entrance and came inside at Joe's lighthearted answer.

Joe brushed back his silver hair and stood up from his stool upon seeing the color of the knight's face.

"Is it bad news?"

"No.....but I didn't know what I should do."

The senior knight, who was under Joe's direct supervision, appeared perplexed. He continued, "that is, I actually decided on my own to dispatch a few men to the enemy..."

"——Not to Safir, but to Princess Shelfa?"

“Yessir. I believed that they were the more formidable enemy than Safir.”

“.....You made the right call. So, what happened then?”

Extremely reluctantly, the knight answered,

“none of my men have returned. I only chose my most skilled men for this mission, but I haven’t heard back from any of them since they departed for Astel.”

Joe did not reply.

Both the knight and Joe already knew. The spies had been discovered and completely wiped out.

They could not approach Rain’s castle no matter who they sent ever since the messenger and the guard unit had returned. Rain’s intelligence network was apparently stronger than Joe had imagined.

Even if they had been attacked by a mysterious enemy and lost a lot of men, the chief envoy had returned alive, so they didn’t have any grounds to complain either. They couldn’t just go up to Rain and say, “return the spies that we sent you safely back to us.”

Anyhow, Joe found it exceedingly unpleasant that Rain and his group were doing something that they didn’t want anyone else to find out about.

“.....What a headache this is, even though Lydia is right before our eyes.”

“I, I’m shorry sir.”

“No, you didn’t do anything wrong. Actually, I’m grateful that you took action.”

Jou smiled faintly and placed a hand on the knight’s shoulder. He continued,

“but don’t bother sending in any more spies. We’ll have to think of something else.”

“Ye, yessir!”

The knight nodded in relief.

That being said, even if Joe wanted to think of something else, the only way to obtain reliable information about an enemy was to send in a skilled spy.

If he wanted his men to return alive, he would have to send in a certain number of soldiers along with the spy to act as a large scouting party, but that would prove to be somewhat problematic at the moment.

After all, they were trying not to make Rain their enemy. He had to avoid the folly of accidentally making more enemies by ordering his soldiers around carelessly.

In other words, he basically had no good way of obtaining intelligence at the moment.

“For now, our first priority is to make time our ally,”

said Joe, almost to himself. He continued,

“we’ll force Galfort to surrender as quickly as possible! That’s the most efficient plan of action we can take.”

Though, it would probably be even better if we pulled out here.

——Naturally, Joe refrained from putting his final thoughts into words.

Even now, he was still opposed to the invasion on an emotional level.

The Chandrys army steadily continued their march for several days without any interference whatsoever and finally arrived at Sunkwoll’s capital, Lydia.

Lydia was an oval-shaped city that was surrounded by an outer wall meant to deter enemies.

The giant gates to the city were normally left open and a small unit from Galfort’s army was stationed there to perform a rigorous check on the travelers who visited Lydia.

Usually, any foreigner who wanted to visit Lydia first had to undergo a simple check at a checkpoint set up by one of the lords who owned territory near the national border and pay a toll. Then, they would have to go through a similar process once they finally reached the capital. Thus, it could be said that the gates served as the final checkpoint before entering the city.

——Or, that’s how it was supposed to be, but the toll had been repealed

under Princess Shelfa's name just the other day.

Joe didn't know if things had changed ever since a new master had taken over the capital, but in either case, the gates were currently closed to prevent anyone from entering.

Evidently, even the carefree nobles had received news about the invasion.

Joe had his large army suddenly spread out and form battle formations with the capital's outer walls before their eyes. They had not sent their enemies a messenger like they had with Rain. Neither Joe nor Folnier considered any of the nobles worthy enough to extend that courtesy to them.

Folnier drew her horse closer to Joe's once the latter had finished giving out numerous orders in rapid succession.

"It seems like our enemies have chosen to hold the castle."

Her eyes were blazing in apparent exhilaration.

There were hardly any examples of enemies who had been able to invade this far into Sunkwoll territory ever since the nation's founding. That was to say nothing of the fact that nobody to date had been able to occupy it.

Even Zarmine, as large of a country as it was, had fallen just short of being able to capture the capital.

Folnier was likely excited at the prospect that she might be the first person in history to accomplish the feat.

"I don't mean to belittle our enemies, but I believe that it's closer to the truth to say that they had no other choice *but* to hold the castle, rather than to say that they intentionally chose the strategy. I'm sure this is the case, considering the reports I've received from our spies."

"Oh? If so, then the outcome of this battle is already as good as decided."

".....You shouldn't let your guard down,"

Joe said flatly as he saw the soldiers setting up siege weapons out of the corner of his eye.

Incidentally, their 'siege weapons' had rectangular, box-shaped bases that were several meters long, which they would ram against the gates using brute strength in order to break it down.

Attached to its forefront was an iron point that resembled an arrowhead.

Additionally, in the same glance, Joe saw that the soldiers were also setting up weapons that looked like wooden watchtowers. Soldiers would climb up to the top of these towers and shoot down at enemy soldiers from a position that was higher than the castle ramparts.

The above weapons were all customary weapons of a siege battle, but they seemed unwieldy from Joe's point of view.

There was an easier way to get things done. For example, if they used his personal power, the gates before them would fall without offering even the least resistance.

However, Joe greatly disliked using his power like that on the battlefield. It was not the type of 'power' to bring to a fight. That was what Joe thought.

If he was to live his life as a human, he should fight like a human as well.

"Be that as it may, but Rain didn't show up in the end. Did he decide to turn a blind eye to us?"

Folnier spoke up again. She gave Joe a side-eye as she giggled.

She was likely poking fun at Joe, who brought up the topic of Rain at the drop of a hat.

"I believe otherwise. That man will likely pick a fight with us sometime soon.....without fail. He's not the type of man to sit on his hands and simply watch."

"I wonder. The number of soldiers in the Princess' party doesn't number ten-thousand even with a generous estimate. I feel like I'm correct in saying that he simply decided to avoid fighting. Rain is a smart man, is he not? I don't think it'd be strange for him to make such a decision."

—*Certainly.*

It was certainly one valid path that Rain could take.

But Joe thought that Rain was not the type of person who would make that decision.

Joe felt that if both the path of fighting and the path of running away were presented before Rain, and if taking a third route in between the two was out of the question, Rain would ultimately choose the former.

That being said, that was only what Joe's intuition told him, so he did not speak a word of it to his liege.

Thus, Joe simply bowed his head in silence and ended the conversation there. Folnier, however, appeared less than pleased with the outcome.

She puffed up her cheeks a little and said,

"I can tell, Joe. You're refraining from saying something again. I thought I told you that there was to be no holding back between the two of us. When all things are said and done, in the future I want you——"

"My apologies, Lady Fol. We have a guest on top of the ramparts."

"What?!"

Folnier looked up, startled. She had evidently mistaken their 'guest' as Rain.

Then, upon seeing the obvious noble who was combing down his blond curls standing atop the ramparts, Folnier immediately looked less than impressed.

"Oh, is he Safir or whatever it was? I'd thought that he'd have a stupid face, and it appears that I wasn't too far off the mark. He really looks like an idiot."

The soldiers around her tried their best not to laugh after hearing her harsh evaluation of Safir.

Then, Safir, the man in question, cupped both of his hands to his mouth and began to scream. He was loud enough that the middle-aged man standing next to him, who looked like a general, grimaced.

"Hold it! Hold it hold it hold it, hold it right thereeeee! Just what justification do you have for invading my territory?! You should be ashamed of yourselves! Aren't you embarrassed after taking a moment to think about exactly what you're doing?!"

Neither Joe nor Fournier replied as Safir heaved up and down from his shouting (his voice wouldn't reach them if he didn't yell).

Fournier yawned, as if she keeping herself from saying how boring she found his speech out loud and Joe silently unfastened his favored bow from his saddle.

Safir stomped his feet from far up above (and far away from) them.

"Hey youuu! I, I'm the master of this kingdom! Don't you dare ignore meee!"

Fournier reacted to him for the first time.

She raised her far-reaching voice and declared,

"you call yourself the kingdom's master, but unfortunately, we don't acknowledge you as the rightful ruler of Sunkwoll. Sorry about that, you idiotic fool of a noble!"

"Wha, what did you saay?!"

The bitter-looking general standing in wait besides Safir stopped the latter from screaming anything else as he flew into a rage. He pointed at Joe and offered Safir a word of caution.

Safir was afraid for a moment, but quickly regained his composure.

He cupped his hands to his mouth again and said,

"hey you, the young whelp over there! Arrows won't hit their mark from that distance! Even I know that much!"

It was pathetic how readily Safir admitted his ignorance regarding warfare, but what he pointed out was generally true. It was nearly impossible to hit a small target from that kind of distance. The effective range of a bow and arrow was only about a few dozen meters.

However, that logic only held true for normal people using normal bows.

There were always exceptions to the rule.

"A young whelp, was it?"

Fournier snorted. She continued,

"I guess you can find the blind just about anywhere. I wonder what that noble

idiot would say if he knew how old you really are?”

Joe simply smiled. Then, he readied a specially made large and tough bow that normal people would have trouble drawing even to half of its full extent and nocked an arrow. Joe readily drew the bow taut and nonchalantly shot an arrow aimed at Safir. He hadn't even bothered to make sure that his aim was true.

Swoosh!

The conspicuously loud sound of the arrow cutting through the air coincided with Safir's general's warning cry. Joe's arrow howled through the air where Safir's, who had been pushed down, head had been just moments earlier.

With his excellent hearing, Joe could even hear the quivering scream that the young noble had let out.

“—An excellent decision. The enemy has at least one competent general with them.”

Joe nodded, impressed.

He waited for a little while without breaking out of his stance, but Safir did not stand back up again. He had apparently crawled away from the ramparts. Instead, Joe's party heard Safir's voice saying the stereotypical lines, “I'll remember this you bastards!” as it echoed into the distance.

“That was unfortunate, Joe,”

Folnier said as she laughed merrily. She continued,

“as weak of an enemy he may be, it seems like he still has a bit of luck on his side.”

“If we had finished things off here, we could have eliminated the need for a siege battle..... It seems that things just don't want to go our way,”

Joe replied with a wry smile and was about to raise a hand. He was about to give his men the order to commence attack.

——Just then.

Joe heard a voice calling out to him across the wind from far away.

When he turned toward it, he saw a lone man whipping his horse as fast as it could go approaching while stirring up a cloud of dust. It was a man he knew. The man was one of the spies he had dispatched to Astel but had given up on because they hadn't returned.

Joe lowered his half-raised arm and waited for the spy to draw closer.

"Gr, Grand General! Oh.....a, and Your Majesty as well."

"I don't mind!"

Folnier sharply stopped the man as he attempted to dismount. She continued, "this is a battlefield. We don't need to go through with cumbersome formalities. You can give Joe your report first."

"Yes ma'am! Thank you for your consideration!"

Grateful, the man went up to Joe and whispered something rapidly in the latter's ear. Joe remained composed as he received the report and looked to Folnier when the spy was done.

".....What is it?"

"It looks like we'll need to hold a war council."

Joe let the other generals, who had hastily gathered in a large tent, know of what he learned from the report he had just received.

Everybody who was seated on a stool looked dubious upon hearing what Joe had to say, though Joe did not blame them for it.

"So.....are you sure that our opponent's a guy named Ralphus?"

Zartz asked modestly, for once.

"The spy was only able to catch a glimpse on them from afar, so I can't say

anything for certain, but their insignia was definitely decorated with the crest of a lion. Then again, we can't rule out that they might be dummy soldiers either. The spy wasn't able to get close enough to check."

Joe frowned and shook his head. He continued,

"in any case, let's assume that the army is real. A unit of two to three thousand under General Ralphus' command deployed from Astel. They took the highway and headed directly north. From the direction they're going, we can probably assume that they're headed here."

".....That's kinda few in terms of numbers,"

Sayle pointed out as he tilted his head to the side. He continued,

"and it's not like.....he doesn't know about our numbers, right?"

"That's not the case,"

Joe declared as he shook his head. He continued,

"their ability to gather intelligence is outstanding. They probably have a clear grasp of our numbers, give or take less than a hundred."

"Then, what does this mean?"

asked Shing this time. He continued,

"it's not like he's making a desperate bid or something, is it?"

"I don't know either,"

Joe said honestly before adding, "but..."

"——we can still speculate. Ralphus' unit is probably a decoy. A fake to draw away our attention. They likely never had the intention to fight from the start. In that case, it would make sense for them to be so few in number."

Folnier, seated beside Joe, gave her assent.

"I can predict that much as well. No.....there's more. Isn't Rain planning to invade Chandrys and capture Zawall, and Sadaraan (the royal castle of Chandrys), in one fell swoop?"

The tent grew noisy all at once.

That they could have their all-important home base taken from them while they were out on a military campaign themselves.....was a chilling idea, so no one could blame them.

Annoyed, Shing said,

“is he some kind of sneaky thief?!”

and punched a fist into the palm of his other hand.

Zartz yelled as well.

“The soldiers won’t be able to fight calmly if news of this gets out!”

He had a point.

But.....that was only if that was truly Rain’s party’s aim.

The defense around their capital city, Zawoll, had indeed decreased substantially now that the Chandrys army’s main force was here in Sunkwoll. The unit they had left behind was only a few thousand in number, so there was merit for Rain in making that all or nothing gamble. If it was Rain, he would probably invade into Zawoll like the wind and capture Sadaraan.

But, was that really his aim?

Folnier gently called out to Joe as he peacefully closed his eyes.

“Did I guess wrong?”

“No. I wouldn’t say that. As long as we don’t know where Rain currently is, it’s most sensible to assume that he plans on making an assault on Zawoll.And currently, I believe that it’s the most effective strategy for him as well.”

“But, something still doesn’t sit well with you. Is that what it is?”

“.....Yes.”

“It’s not that I don’t understand how you’re feeling, but as long as we don’t have any concrete evidence, we have to form our plans around the most probable outcome.”

Folnier decisively made her decision as she always did and looked to Joe. She continued, “and so, assuming that Rain will head for our capital, what do you think we should do? What’s your opinion?”

“——We should ignore Ralphus’ unit and turn our entire army around to pursue after Rain’s unit and annihilate them. It’s a roundabout strategy, but it’s also the most certain.”

As he had expected, Folnier did not approve. She stared at Joe’s face and furrowed her brows.

“.....Aren’t you being a little too pessimistic? Why do we need to turn around our entire army? Weren’t you the one who taught me that ——“it’s a good strategy to purposefully split our army in two if we have at least double the number of troops” during my military strategy classes when I was young? Not only do we have double their numbers right now, but we have multiple times that!”

“You have great memory, Lady Fol.”

Joe smiled faintly. He continued,

“I most certainly did tell you that. However, please don’t forget that my lectures were purely theoretical. You battle human opponents in war. I believe that it is best to be flexible depending on your opponent.”

“And that’s how wary you are of Rain.....is that what you’re trying to say?”

Joe nodded deeply.

“Indeed. However, Rain is not omnipotent, naturally. Let’s say that his biggest weakness is his lack of troops. That’s why he had to rely on clever schemes during Sunkwoll’s war with Zarmine. Thus, he won’t be able to take advantage of any openings we may present as long as we concentrate our larger army and manage it effectively.

Folnier silently listened to Joe’s easy to understand explanation from beginning to end. Still, the expression on her face made it easy to see that she wasn’t convinced in the slightest.

No one, including Joe, bothered Folnier while she was deep in thought. Everyone kept silent and waited for their liege to speak.

And then, Folnier announced her decision when she finally looked back up.

“Joe, I have faith in your abilities. This time too, I don’t doubt that we’ll be

victorious if we followed your opinion. However! I was the one who started this war in the first place. I'm sorry, but I want you to let me do things my way until the very end."

Joe simply bowed his head without a single word of protest. It was because he had a hunch.....that their defeat would not be fatal even if they lost this war.

Besides, it wasn't as if Folnier's plan was completely off the mark either.

"In that case, we'll do as you wish. And so, what would you like to do?"

"Let's stay faithful to the basics, like in your theoretical lectures."

Folnier grinned. She continued,

"we'll divide our troops in two, so we'll have ten thousand men to ambush Ralphus' unit with and another ten thousand to pursue Rain. We can leave Safir for later.Why don't we let Rain's party taste a bit of pain while we're at it?"

"——As you command, Lady Fol. Still, and while I know I say this often, you shouldn't let your guard down. You mustn't underestimate General Ralphus just because his troops are fewer in number."

I know, Folnier answered with a bright smile.

Even still, Joe was worried about whether or not she truly understood.

"Now then, let's split up into units.I'll leave the specifics to you, Joe."

Folnier snuck in a wink when the other generals weren't looking.

Both her words and her wink were probably her way of apologizing to Joe for flatly refusing his advice.

Joe did not dislike that aspect of his liege.

Which was why he smiled in response to convey that he didn't mind in the slightest.

Then, he made his decision a beat later.

"Then, we'll split our army in two as per Lady Fol's decision."

A wave of tension ran through Junna and the generals. Joe continued,

"first is the group tasked to pursue and capture Rain..... I want to have Shing

do this. Sayle and Junna, please work with him. You'll have ten thousand men. I want you to organize your unit around a cavalry since speed is the problem here. Zartz, you'll be staying here with me."

".....Suree."

Zartz nodded pathetically.

He had undoubtedly wanted to cross blades with the rumored Rain.

Sayle simply grinned and said, "Junna, let's do our best to help Mr. Shing," to his sister. Shing, who was still all tensed up, simply nodded.

"Ten thousand to the pursuit unit..... You've assigned a lot of troops to Rain. The truth is that you wanted to join the pursuit unit yourself, isn't it, Joe?"

There was an obvious hint of mischief in Folnier's mien.

Lady Fol is correct,

Joe acknowledge in his heart, though he did not put it to words.

He had wanted to capture Rain personally if at all possible if the latter really was heading for Zawoll.

However, it was none other than Folnier's existence that kept Joe from doing so.

While Rain did not have any set pattern of attack, he did have a strategy that he liked to use often.

It was a simple yet effective strategy called "crushing the enemy's head". And, in this case, the 'head' referred to Folnier.

This was why Joe could not leave his liege's side, 'just in case'.

Joe currently had no other choice but to listen to Folnier's opinions as her retainer and could not secure his personal freedom of movement due to the reason mentioned above.

And so, he had gone with the second-best plan.....or rather, he had increased the number of troops assigned to Shing's unit in order to erase his personal worries.....

But even still, his worries had not disappeared.

Joe would have to warn Shing not to ever “recklessly challenge Rain in single combat” later just as he had with Sayle.

And even after having done all of that, his regret did not fade away in the slightest.

Both he and Fournier had made a decisive mistake regarding Rain’s ulterior motives..... Joe could not help but think that this was the case.

Chapter 6: The Battle of Dead Valley

Part 1

Shing, who had received orders from the grand general he so respected, made haste to the border with Sayle and Junna's cooperation. He only finally received credible news after a few days of hurrying along with their cavalry-focused unit.

They had met with an express messenger from their home country in the middle of their march.

The information the messenger had brought indicated that Folnier had been right on the money.

"You saw the enemy's insignia? Are you certain of this!?"

"I am! We sighted the enemy army crossing the mountains!"

The messenger continued to rattle on as his breathing grew ragged. He continued,

"there have been multiple eyewitness reports. The insignia— —was of a pure white phoenix with its wings spread open holding a magic sword in its mouth against a black background! The colors of the dyes used on it were vibrant! The army, led by a general dressed in all black, numbered about two thousand five hundred! At present, they have circumvented one of our fortresses and are breaking through the border!"

"All right! You may return. Tell the standing army that they are not to move

from Sadaraan under any circumstances! We'll take care of the rest!"

"Sir yes sir!"

Even the normally reserved Shing could not help but feel so excited that he could have jumped for joy at the time. He uncharacteristically pumped a fist while still on horseback.

"We've finally got him by the tail! We can catch up to him if we hurry! That sneaky thief's plan wasn't half bad, but that's all there is to it once it's been uncovered. Even Sir Rain, once feared as the 'Unknown Genius', can get tripped up by his own strategies."

"Um....."

"Sir Sayle, is something the matter?"

Sayle swallowed his words upon seeing how much of a good mood Shing was in.

"Do you really think it'll go that well? Isn't there a chance that he's pulling a trick on us?"

Sayle could not find it in him to say the words that he had wanted to say. This was one of the things that made Sayle such a good-natured person.

Oh well, he thought.

He had no concrete proof of the contrary to begin with. While he was suspicious of how easily they were able to chase after Rain, it was still true that Rain would have lost time if he did not take the regular route.

There's likely no doubt about it if they've sighted a unit that looks like it might be his.....

As usual, Sayle firmly hugged Junna, who was riding in front of him, and smiled amicably.

"It's nothing. And, how should I put it.....we'll do our best too, so please go and bring home great deed of arms!"

"What are you talking about?! If we annihilate his unit, it'll be an achievement to share amongst all of us. I should be the one asking you for your support, Sir

Sayle.”

The older commander bowed his head low to Sayle, who was his junior in years by far.

I really respect his attitude, especially considering that my rank is a lot lower than his. He really is a good person.

Sayle was thoroughly impressed. He truly wanted, without considering his personal costs and gains, for Shing to be able to return with a stellar deed of arms.

That was why Sayle drowned out his sudden burst of anxiety and, from the bottom of his heart, said instead,

“let’s hurry! We’ll be able to capture him soon if we’re lucky!”

“Yeah!!”

Shing and the rest of his unit hurried forth, brimming with hopes of certain victory.

“The invading army has split into two. One unit of ten thousand, led by General Shing, is headed our way!”

Rain chuckled to himself upon hearing the report.

(I’m willing to bet money on it..... The great Joe was overpowered by his vixen of a liege.)

What kinds of insights they had offered, how the flow of the conversation had went, and what the ultimate decision from the war council had been— —. Rain could imagine the gist of what had happened even without having been present in the discussion.

“While Ralphus and his unit act as bait to draw out our attention, Rain will target our short-staffed capital.”

The plan that they had imagined for Rain wasn't a bad one per se, but Rain was aiming for something else entirely.

For better or worse, even Joe Lamberck had yet to realize what Rain's true motives were.Though it would become troublesome if he didn't.

In any event, Rain, the man who was being targeted by both Folnier's Chandrys army and Safir and the other nobles' army, was currently sitting at leisure against a rock on cliff on top of a steep ravine dubbed "Dead Valley".

A highway weaved its way through the rugged mountains at the Chandrys-Sunkwoll border and occasionally cut through between two mountains just like it did here at the place where Rain was.

The highway had originally been a river that had dried up ages ago, and was thus literally a dried up, "dead valley".¹ Both Sunkwoll and Chandrys maintained the natural-made path to use as a highway.

The entire path zig-zagged all throughout, causing for horrible visibility.

Moreover, the cliff that Rain had chosen was over a hundred meters above the road and stuck out over it like a terrace.

Rain had piled up stacks of boulders and earth and was biding his time on top of the cliff.

Indeed, unlike what the express messenger from Chandrys had reported to Shing, Rain and his unit had yet to cross the border and were actually quite far from it. Not only that, but he had no intention of invading into Chandrys at all.

However, the Sunkwoll unit that the enemy had sighted had most certainly existed.

The unit that had actually crossed the border were residents of Astel whom Rain had paid to act as dummy soldiers. Since they had money to burn, they had vigorously gathered people to recruit and had organized a decoy unit.

The decoy unit had accomplished their objective in spectacular fashion. They had circumvented the border fortress and were following along the mountains

while they invaded into Chandrys one after another.

At the moment, they were probably dawdling around marking time at the other side of the border. In addition, the enemy's standing army was likely defending Sadaraan castle with everything they had. Even if they weren't they did not have the numbers to spare for a counterattack.

Which meant that Rain was free to use bold strategies.

Rain was basking happy-go-luckily in the sun when a lone runner knight ran up to him. The knight had brought him a follow-up report.

"General! A report from the spies: After receiving a report from an express messenger from the Chandrys standing army, the enemy unit led by Shing has increased their marching speed and are approaching at a rapid pace!"

"Good work."

The knight returned back the way he came after Rain had nodded lightly.

After seeing off the knight's retreating figure, Rain surveyed over the individuals who had gathered on top of the cliff. Leni, Senoa, and Selphie and Yuri. The usual lineup, along with Miran and their subordinates, were awaiting on standby.

Rain turned to them and simply said,

"you heard what he said, it's almost time for the main show. I'll have you guys work for your wages too."

Everyone nodded while looking like they'd wet themselves.

Still, as always, Yuri said,

"then what are we standing around here for, Geeneral. You don't need us here with you, right, Geeneral?"

".....The way you say "Geeneral" like that really conveys your utter lack of respect for me. Well, I guess you never really had any, though."

Rain scowled but still answered her anyway. He continued,

"what you said is true. But, well, how should I put this, I've been pretty popular as of late. I don't really mind taking them all on, but I probably

shouldn't 'cause we're in the middle of an operation right now. Which is also why I'm not supposed to be alone until the very last moment."

Yuri looked like she had just been made to hear the doctrine of some shady cult.

"Umm, I have absolutely no idea what you just said."

"That's fine. I'll spell it out for you when everything's over."

Yuri flared her nostrils in displeasure as Rain waved her away with a hand and cast a quick side eye. At the receiving end of her look was Senoa.

As for what the beautiful aide with outstanding figure had been doing for a while since, she had drawn her sword before her beautiful eyes and was rubbing it down with a piece of cloth with all of her might.

She could have just obediently sat down and waited.

The sight of her was a headache for Rain as well.

She apparently could not help but really, really want to polish her prided weapon and had been scrubbing it clean for a while. Now that Rain thought about it, she had bragged that, "this treasured sword is an heirloom of the Estherhart family, hohoho," not too long ago.

Though, nobody had asked her about it.

Anyway, while Rain didn't know if the treasured sword was really an heirloom or whatever, the sword had certainly been polished so much from Senoa's endless effort that her face reflected off of it.

She breathed on to the blade of her sword and wiped it down with a "creepy" smile on her face.....and she did that over and over again.

Nobody dared to sit around her because they were frightened by the dangerous scene, creating a hole around Senoa.

"Well, there's certainly someone here who you might want to quarantine~,"

Yuri said, as if she was seriously considering the long term.

Rain sullenly furrowed his brows and stood up for the first time since they had gotten there. He briskly walked over behind the blonde Senoa.

However, Senoa, smartly clad in white leather armor, did not take notice of him.

She simply continued to sit down in a ladylike manner and furiously polish her sword.

“Haaa~~ (the sound of her breathing onto her sword)”

Then, she wiped it down with her cloth and grinned at the spotless blade of her polished sword.

“Hehehe.....eheheh!”

“Quit it, it’s getting annoying!”

“! Fubyuw!”

Rain kicked Senoa in the back of her head so hard that onlookers could not help but wonder if he really had to put so much strength into it, causing Senoa to tumble to the ground while still holding her sword.

She almost impaled her own throat because she had been holding her sword vertically upright and screamed a scream that sounded like her soul was fading away.

“Omi! Omi!!”

She had probably meant to say “oh my god,” but she was too flustered and couldn’t get the words out properly.

She grew vigorously angry after she finally stood up with a pallid face.

“What are you doing?! I almost died a dishonorable death because of you!”

“You’re being plenty dishonorable just as it is! Go back to your family’s castle and pull grass in the courtyard or something, you stupid idiot!”

“E, even if you’re my liege, there are things that you should and shouldn’t say! It’s the honorable duty of a knight to look after their weapon before battle ish it not?!”

Rain mercilessly interrupted Senoa, who was rattling on so fervently that her tongue could not quite keep up with her.

“What do you mean, “ish it not”?! I don’t know what you think you’re talking

about, but you're in command of rear support for this battle. The unit that'll be doing the actual fighting deployed a while ago."

"No, no way!"

Senoa's visage had just been about to recover, but then the blood drained from her face again. It was quite the spectacle. She continued,

"I was planning on mowing down swarms of our enemies and showing off my skill with the sword today! So why, why did you put me in command of da rear?!"

At this point, Senoa stopped caring about the number of eyes looking at her. She quickly stood up, grabbed Rain by the collar, and protested with a threatening attitude.

Rain found himself in a pickle. Even if he honestly told her, *"you'd die in five seconds flat if you fought as you are now! Go wash your face in soup and come back again!"* his aide wouldn't have been satisfied.

She was fairly talented with her other duties outside of fighting due to her steady personality, but not only did she lack experience when it came to actual battle, she overwhelmingly lacked ability as well.

In other words, Senoa could only display her strengths in warfare up until the point where swords began to clash.

"Listen up, Senoa."

Rain promptly cut through her gushing protests that bordered verbal abuse and firmly grabbed Senoa's sloping shoulders with both hands.

The effect was immediate and Senoa quivered. Rain didn't quite understand why, but she was apparently weak to getting physically touched. She visibly lost steam even though she had been in the middle of an angry huff.

And so, Rain had recently taken to almost exclusively touching Senoa physically during times like this.

There was a small amount of danger of being misunderstood from various points of view (particularly Shelfa's), but he couldn't have cared less about that at the moment.

"A general's job isn't to actually fight. It's to command; our job is to command our soldiers! You need to start being more aware of your own position."

"Y, yessir....."

Senoa glanced repeatedly at the hands on her shoulders and grew visibly red. She had become as meek as a lamb.

She probably would have forgiven him if he had let his hands wander lower and grabbed her breasts in this state, but even Rain refrained from doing so.

Though he couldn't make any promises for the future.

"Do you understand?!"

"B, but!"

With the area under her eyes still blushing faintly, she quietly continued,

"General, you wield your sword in battle yourself, do you not, sir?"

Do you not, sir? Hey, why're you being so polite all of a sudden?

Rain thought, but purposefully stopped himself from asking out loud.

As surprising as it was, it could simply just be the way Senoa normally talked when she was home in her family's castle. She would occasionally let her girlishness slip out, but that might have actually been the real Senoa.

Is she pushing herself too much when she's here?

Rain kept the thought locked away in his heart and spat out his usual lines.

"I'm special. A genius is a genius because he does what others don't. And by genius, I mean me."

"I, I understand....."

Senoa agreed readily as she fidgeted while looking down.

Rain didn't know why, but the effects had been amazing.

When Rain looked up while wondering what was up with her, everyone else who had been watching them with baited breath suddenly looked away.

It looked extremely forced.

Rain could guess the reason as to why Miran's face was bright red for some reason (Miran was pure at heart after all), but he had no idea why Selphie looked like she was about to burst into tears.

Rain let go of Senoa and tilted his head to the side.

Then, Leni speedily turned to him with a mixture of nervousness and a tinge of fear on his face.

"In, in any case, I hope it all goes well! T, the Princess is eagerly awaiting your return after all, General. You have to hurry back to her soon, right?"

"Oh, right!"

Yuri said in a suddenly happy tone as she leaned forward. She continued,

"she.....I mean, the Princess really does like to cling to you, General, so how was it like when you parted, huh, huh?"

She looked extraordinarily interested.

Yuri was a girl who liked to ask questions in general, but it looked like she had developed yet another bad habit.

"Even if you ask me how it was like.Well, it's true that she was being difficult."

Rain sighed.

She had *really* been difficult this time around. He'd told her that he'd be back soon, that he wouldn't be gone for weeks or anything like that, but the Little one had been difficult to convince.

Shelfa was a princess who had been raised on a noble upbringing, but she was extremely obedient to Rain on a fundamental level. She had a tremendous amount of trust in him. For instance, if he told her, "I need the money so let me use your funds," she would allow him to do so without even asking what he needed the money for.

She tended to be like that with Ralphus as well, but she seemed to be particularly convicted in her belief that "there are no errors in Rain's counsel."

However, she was only difficult to satisfy with half-hearted reasons when it

came to “Rain going somewhere without me”.

She had persistently asked Rain to take her along with him even after he had carefully chosen his words to explain why it was inadvisable. It had been terribly difficult to persuade her— —that it was a terrible idea so she should bear with it for now.

“I feel like everything around me becomes dark when you’re not here, Rain..... I’ll be good, so please take me with you.”

She had stared up at him with teary eyes as she spoke.

Her eyes were terribly destructive and he had needed iron willpower to deny her what she wanted.

She became naturally miserable since she had not meant to trouble Rain in the slightest and had only been thinking about how she was about to be left behind.

It had taken quite a bit of energy to persuade Shelfa in her “take me with you mode”.

If an unknowing third party had seen them, they would have thought that Rain was about to leave the princess’ side permanently.

Rain returned to his senses when he suddenly heard rough breathing.

He turned around to see Kris, whom he had completely forgotten about, making signals at him with his eyes (or so Rain thought).

“Is something the matter, Kris?”

Rain looked at his comrades.

Selphie quickly looked away in a panic after he met her.....how should he put it, her accusing gaze.

Rain tilted his head a little, but he felt the enemy approaching with his skin so he honed his senses and searched out their presences.

“Hmm.....now should be a good time. Alright, you guys can go back to your posts now.”

He clapped his hands loudly once.

When everybody was nervously getting up, he nonchalantly called out,

“err~, Selphie, you stay behind for a sec. I have something to say to you.”

He ignored the fact that Yuri’s ears and immediately perked up but was surprised when everyone else stopped where they stood as well.

“Hey, quit being weirdly suspicious. It’s serious talk, seriously.”

Selphie timidly walked up to Rain. Then, she looked down at her feet and didn’t move in the slightest.

Rain wasn’t sure if he should say that her movements were stiff, but, in any case, she looked visibly nervous.

Rain waited for everyone to descend down the path behind him before starting a conversation with her, but——

Before he did, he gave Yuri, who had remained behind, a strict order.

“You hurry up and scram too!”

Yuri puffed up her cheeks in dissatisfaction but she obediently turned around.

It had looked like she would continue down the path, but she stopped in her tracks and cast a ‘V’ with her fingers in Selphie’s direction.

She jogged away only after wishing Selphie the best of luck.

“What exactly is she wishing you luck on?”

“W, who can say?”

Selphie hung down her head again.

Rain stroked his chin and cut straight to the point.

“Do you not want to kill people anymore?”

Selphie's head shot straight back up.

She was undoubtedly still frightened, but she also looked somewhat relieved.

"——I know. I'll just be that much of a burden on someone else if I run away..... But even though I know that, I don't know if I'll be able to kill someone or not....."

"I get how you're feeling."

Selphie blinked her light green eyes, perhaps because Rain's tone had been surprisingly kind. Evidently, she had thought that she was about to get yelled at. Rain continued,

"it's normal to worry about that. Only those who are messed up in the head somewhere are able to cut people down one after another without any questions."

".....Yes."

"You know, Selphie..."

Selphie tilted her head to the side in a quizzical manner.

Rain smiled and quietly said,

"it's not a disgrace to not be able to kill. You should actually be proud of it. It just means that you're a caring person. It's not something you need to beat yourself up over. If you don't want to fight anymore, you can choose a different path for yourself. No one will blame you for it. Myself included, of course."

Selphie looked like she was trying to hold something back as her lips quivered.

".....But even still, I still want to be a knight. Just like my late father was."

"——I see,"

Rain replied concisely and simply nodded.

Everyone had their circumstances. She would tell him about hers if she wanted to. There was no reason for him to pry, and they didn't have the time for it either.

"Um.....I have a favor I want to ask of you."

Her voice was colored by tense anxiety.

“What’s up? Need another advance payment?”

“No I doon’t~. Lord Rain, it’s like you think that money is the only thing I ever need to ask you about.”

She finally smiled.

She continued on her momentum and her mouth swiftly opened again.

“Um, I know it’s a bit sudden. But I wanted to ask you.....to hold me.”

“Mmph!”

Rain furrowed his brows and pulled his lips taut.

After surveying his surroundings with a gaze that wasn’t any lesser than what he would have used when in battle mode, he whispered tensely like he was sharing a secret.

“You talking about getting down and dirty?”

Selphie immediately turned bright red. She too surveyed their surroundings in a panic.

“Ab, absolutely not! And besides, what’s that even supposed to mean anyway?!!”

“You’re awfully flustered for someone who didn’t know what that meant.”

Rain laughed out loud.

Selphie half-pretended to flare up at him. But, she stopped after looking up at Rain’s face.

A smile escaped her.

“.....You were trying to get me to cheer up by saying that, weren’t you, Lord Rain?”

“You’re thinking way too much into it. I was being serious.Anyway, c’mon. It’s cool.”

“.....Huh?”

“Well, *this* is more of what you meant, right? It’s easy enough, as favors go. C’mon, get over here, Selphie.”

Rain stretched out both arms and smiled gently.

The tone of his voice was slightly different from usual and it was almost as if he had returned to his boyhood days from a long time ago.

Selphie timidly looked up at Rain as she reservedly walked toward him one step after another until she finally buried her face into his black shirt.

A tremor ran down her supple figure like ripples when Rain wrapped his arms around her.

“Lord Rain, you’re not my Dad, and I’ve never really thought that you two were similar before now..... But you’re just as kind as he was. You’re both kind and large and warm.....”

“——Oh yeah? I don’t know about me, but it sounds like you had a great old man.”

Selphie cried just a little upon feeling the deep compassion in Rain’s short reply.....

Selphie eventually left as well and Rain looked down at the highway from the top of the cliff alone with only Kris following behind him.

The highway below was straight for the most part, except that there was a smaller road that branched off from it a little behind the point Rain was standing over. But hardly anyone ever used it because it was the long way around to get to Chandrys.

And, on top of the cliff Rain was standing on——

There were the piles of rocks and earth a little to the back so that they couldn’t be seen from below, and further behind them was a line of large jars of oil. The stage had been set and the preparations were complete.

Rain nodded lightly and stood where he was. Kris trotted up next to him as he did.

Rain looked to his side and said,

“it’s almost time. I’m counting on you, partner. It’s be totally lame if you flipped over midair.”

He was immediately met with a gruff snort.

It was likely Kris’ way of saying not to make light of him.

“I know. I’m kidding. Actually, I should actually be worrying about getting thrown off of you, shouldn’t I?”

Kris nodded as if to express his consent.

Rain pat Kris’ abundant mane and waited for the moment closing in on them.

He couldn’t afford to lose.....for everyone’s sake.

“Hurry, hurrry! If we don’t hurry, the enemy will notice us approaching and they’ll slip through our fingers! Keep moving as long as your horses draw breath!”

Shing had his favored horse run at full speed and occasionally shouted out to rouse his comrades.

While he *was* concerned about letting the enemy get away, he was more concerned about letting Rain reach the capital before they caught up. In the worst-case scenario, there was the possibility that Sadaraan would have already fallen by the time Shing got there. He didn’t think it was likely, but he couldn’t deny that the possibility existed. And he had heard that Rain was not only skilled out open battles, but at siege battles as well.

At any rate, there was no record of Rain having ever lost a battle which he had personally commanded.

Moreover, Shing and his unit would be forced to siege their own main castle if

Rain captured Sadaraan. There would be nothing more ridiculous than that. Which was why he had to catch up to Rain by all means possible so that wouldn't happen.

That being said, he still took the necessary precautions.

Shing hadn't forgotten that Joe, whom he respected greatly, had warned him not to fight Rain in single combat, so he had suppressed his impatience and positioned himself at the rear of his army.

This way, he would not have to face Rain in single combat even if they were to suddenly engage in battle.

Shing held no delusions about his own abilities. He understood that he had no chance of beating Rain, who had fought evenly with Grand General Joe Lamberck, in a fair fight. And, most of all, he had no intention of repeating the mistake that Garblake of the Zarmine expeditionary force had made.

This was why Shing did not stand at the vanguard of his army despite his impatience.

This was also the case of Sayle and Junna.

Still, it did not mean that they were being overly cautious.

This was because they were determined to chase after Rain. Shing's army considered themselves as hounds chasing after their prey. In addition, the fact that the enemy army was comparatively smaller than their also weakened their wariness.

Our troops number ten thousand. What can a force of a little over two thousand possibly do to us?!

They had more or less become conceited over the fact that Chandrys had not known defeat for the past few dozen years ever since Grand General Joe Lamberck had assumed his title. Almost nobody understood that.....their victories were owed more to how excellent of a commander Joe was and not because the Chandrys army itself was particularly strong.

And so, their army, which was organized around their cavalry, broke through the mountains that bordered their homeland while kicking up clouds of dirt.

After Shing's army had disappeared into "Dead Valley", which could not be said to be wide even in the slightest, with a cloud of dust in their wake— —

Soldiers shuffled out of the forest at the foot of the mountains and secretly began to tail them.

Unfortunately for them, Shing's army had focused their attention on only what was in front of them. They had not thought even in their wildest dreams that enemy soldiers would appear from behind.

And thus, Rain's plan was half completed.

Part 2

Shing, who was galloping down the highway that was commonly known as “Dead Valley”, looked ahead to find his colleague, Sayle, with his back to him.

Sayle was humble, so he probably hadn’t overtaken Shing on purpose. He had probably ended up in front of Shing unknowingly as the army vigorously rushed through the narrow path.

In any case, Shing urged his favored horse faster in order to catch up to the siblings—

And he heard an inauspicious voice the very moment he did.

“Yo, long time no see!”

—Impossible!

Shing thought the moment he heard the voice.

Hasn’t he crossed the border already?! He shouldn’t be here right now!

But the voice rang out again as if to prove to Shing that it wasn’t a dream.

“He~y. I’m warning you in advance just ‘cause I’m nice~. I’m gonna drop a bunch of rocks and stuff down on you. Make sure you dodge, especially if you’re a girl! If there’s a girl down there, make sure to dodge, understand?!”

Hey, so it’s okay if men don’t dodge?

Shing thought reflexively.

Anyhow, he wasn’t yelling or anything, and he sounded lighthearted as if he was simply requesting another drink at the bar, but—

For some reason, his voice carried well.

Shing looked up in astonishment as he continued to gallop. The mountains were as rugged as they always were and a steep cliff towered over the part that faced the highway. There was one portion where the top of the cliff stuck out over the highway and standing on it was a man dressed in all black.

Goosebumps broke over Shing's entire body despite the distance between them. He had seen that ominous all-black attire before. He screamed, unlike what he would have normally done.

"It's him! He's here!!"

The men around Shing looked at him as if to ask who he was talking about.

A mixture of caution, panic, and a tiny amount of fear erupted in Shing's heart as he pointed at the black-clad man and shouted again.

"It's him, he's Rain!"

Huh?!

Low voices of surprise spread out amongst the army.

The black-clad man.....Rain languidly waved his right arm from side to side as if to answer to Shing's shouting.

——Though he only waved once.

Shing could even discern how Rain flashed his white teeth as he grinned even from the distance.

And then, Rain suddenly vanished deeper into the cliff.

Shing felt like he had received a divine revelation.

He experienced the thing that was commonly referred to as a 'premonition'.

We're in danger!?

“Stop! I want the whole army.....no, just everyone around me to stop your horsesss! The cliff is about to break apaart!”

He immediately pulled at the reins of his favored horse.

However, armies were not known to be able to make sudden emergency stops. Especially not when they had been rushing ahead until just moments ago.

Confusion took its natural course.

Those who stopped as they had been ordered to, those who had failed to hear what Shing had shouted, and those who had swiftly grasped the situation but didn't know what to do. All of them were met with the same misfortune.

They crashed into each other's shoulders or horses in the narrow highway and some knights fell off of their horses.

The area immediately fell into a chaotic uproar with angry screams and jeers filling the air.

But the real panic was yet to come.

The part of the cliff that Rain had been standing on that stuck out over the highway broke off the very moment the dull sound of destruction echoed out from the distance.

Shing, who had already been thrown off of his horse and flung to the side of the highway, watched it fall with despair in his eyes.

A large amount of dirt and a number of boulders fell together as a thunderous roar, reminiscent of the iron hammer of a raging god, sounded.

Rain had probably broken the cliff with magic. An extensive portion of the cliff's top edge had broken off in spectacular fashion.

The ground billowed, causing Shing, who had tried to stand up in a hurry, to tumble over again. The earth, which was supposed to be solid, was undulating like the great ocean during a fierce storm.

A white cloud of dust rose up from the ground at the same time, covering his field of vision almost instantly.

And so, Shing simply remained on the ground in a daze.

As for Sayle and Junna, on the other hand.

To sum it up, they had been slightly less fortunate than Shing. In other words, they were positioned closer to where Rain had dropped the cliff.

Sayle had grumbled something close along the lines of, ‘whoa, I knew it was a trap~. Oh man. I knew I had a bad feeling about thiis,’ to himself when Rain had announced that he was going to drop~ the cliff, but more importantly, he was naturally at a loss.

He wondered what the correct response to the timed situation was: to keep running to stay clear of the damage or to stay where he was. At the moment, the siblings were situated in an awkward location.

It needn’t be said that, for the time being, the worst possible choice was to be underneath the falling cliff and get crushed under the earth.

— —However.

While Sayle still kept his composure in this kind of emergency situation because of his ditzy personality, the same could not be said of others.

Location-wise, Rain’s warning had been clearly heard by the army and was easy for everyone to instantly understand where the danger would occur. Moreover, someone had shouted, “the cliff is gonna fallll!” as if to drive the message home.

It was a trick based on their survival instincts.

Most of the army had reflexively made a desperate effort to hurry their horses forward. They had neither Sayle’s outstanding analytical ability nor his composure.

As a result, Sayle’s men rushed their horses forward in a panic while Sayle was trying to do the opposite and slow his horse down.

Multiple people crashed into him from behind as a result, and, while Sayle was able to maintain his posture, Junna, who was riding in front of him, was thrown off of the horse.

The blood drained from his face.

When Sayle turned around, pallid, he found that his beloved younger sister had been thrown off the side of the highway because they had thankfully been near the edge. She likely wasn't hurt too bad either, seeing that she got up right away.

Sayle wanted to rush back to her, but everyone else was pushing against him with the single purpose of fleeing for their lives. It was impossible to turn his horse around in this kind of situation.

And then, he heard a thunderous roar coming from above.

Sayle made his decision on the spur of the moment.

"Junna, stay where you are. Put up a shield if you have to! I'll come back to save you no matter what. Wait for me where you are!"

"B, brother~!"

It took all of his willpower for Sayle to turn his back on his younger sister, who was now far behind him. Junna would be fine because she had her magic. He was actually in more danger than she was. His hesitation had put him directly inside the danger zone.

Sayle buried his face into his horse's mane and single-mindedly hurried forward. He felt the earth shake and he heard a loud sound. He wanted to look up, but he didn't have the leisure to do so.

Then, a black shadow covered Sayle from above and cut off the sunlight. It was proof that a large amount of earth was falling directly on top him.

Shit, I can't die yet!

Junna will be sad if I'm gone.....so I can't die just yet!

Sayle desperate urged his favored horse forward and galloped toward the light in front of him.

Eventually, Sayle felt the earth shake and heard a roar that was louder than

anything he had heard thus far and was thrown to the ground, horse and all.

Sayle was knocked unconscious for a little while despite that he had properly rolled into his fall because he had been thrown fairly hard.

However, he was only out for less than a minute. He regained his senses soon and quickly got up.

“Junna, Junna!!”

“General!”

Sayle’s men gathered around him upon hearing him shout.

“W, what happened?!”

Sayle blinked because there was dust in his eyes.

The cloud of sand was dying down, at least.

“.....It’s just as you can see. The highway was buried under the falling earth, and we were separated from General Shing.”

We weren’t only separated from Mr. Shing, we were separated from my younger sister too!

Sayle was about to shout back angrily, but he took a few deep breaths instead. His subordinate had meant no ill will. Yelling would only serve to take his anger out on an innocent bystander.

Sayle stood up and quickly inspected his surroundings.

It was just as his subordinate had said. The place they had just come from..... the highway that ran through Dead Valley was completely buried under the dirt. It created a small mountain on top of it.

And, numerically speaking, most of the unit had escaped to the “side with the dirt” where Sayle was.

More importantly, had Rain timed this on purpose?

In other words, it meant that Shing’s side had a smaller unit now that they were left behind on the Sunkwoll side of the valley.

The fact that he had placed himself at the back of the army because he was being wary of Rain had done far more harm than good.

“If I recall correctly, there was a side road that they could use to come back over to Chandrys’ side.....”

Sayle mumbled to himself. He continued,

“but more importantly, if Sir Rain’s objective was to separate us—urk, Mr. Shing and the others are in danger!”

His normal, nonchalant expression vanished from his face as Sayle swiftly turned around.

The mountain of dirt was annoyingly tall, but he had to climb it somehow and meet up with Junna and Shing.

“Gen, General! Over there!”

Sayle reflexively looked up when his subordinate shouted. He had instinctively thought that he would find Rain.

And he was right.

Rain was standing on the cliff, which had changed shape now that he had broken off a large chunk of it, and was looking down at them again. Sayle was almost directly below him this time, so he could see Rain’s expressions clearly. Rain looked down at Sayle and the others as if he was checking for something and turned around and walked away when he was done.

“Is, is he still planning on doing more?!”

someone yelled out nervously.

Sayle was nervous himself, but he said,

“don’t falter, okay?! He won’t be able to break off any more of the cliff! For now, we have to do everything we can to meet up with Mr. Shing’s group!”

“General!”

another warning voice called out in no time at all.

When Sayle looked up after bracing himself a little, on his guard because of what had happened last time, he saw a ginormous jar or pot or something flying

up above their heads.

Soon afterward, a bundle of light hit the container, breaking it and scattering its pieces in every direction.

It sprayed out some sort of liquid as it did.

Sayle shivered upon feeling how sticky the liquid, falling upon them like rain, was.

This is— —

“It, it’s oil! This is oil!”

someone else screamed from amongst the crowd.

More jars came flying and scattered one after another midair soon after the scream, drenching Sayle and his men’s clothes and armor in oil. It was irritating, but they had no means of evading it.

At its finale, a large number of jars came flying in at once and were all spectacularly destroyed midair.

And for some reason, Sayle heard someone singing so poorly it was terrifying as it happened.

Evidently, Rain was singly merrily to cheer them on.

Sayle and his group became completely soaked as they looked on in blank amazement.

And then, Sayle had another bad premonition.

Rain had appeared on the cliff yet again as Sayle and all of his men looked up at him.He was carrying a large lit torch in one hand.



.....There was a conspicuously heinous smile on his infamously brazen face.

“Calm down! Listen up, everyone needs to calm down!”

But before Sayle could get the words out.

Yet another soldier had beat him to the chase.

He had good timing. Too good, in fact.

“He, he’s attacking us with fire! We’ll all burn to death if he drops that torch on ussss!”

His scream brought forth the signs of panic.

A wave of unrest ran through the crowd.

Rain, too, joined in and happily called out from above,

“it’s been pretty cold as of late! Why don’t I light a grand fire for you all? Haha!”

——If Sayle’s men had investigated carefully, they would have known that the warning shouts that they had been hearing from the group had not belonged to their comrades.

The shouts had belonged to a few spies that Rain had slipped into their ranks, and one of their goals was to foster panic in the army.

However, neither Sayle, as sharp as he was, nor his men had been able to discern that.

And fear was contagious.

The entire army prepared to flee, incited by the spies who had purposefully taken the initiative to begin running.

“R, ruuun! We’ll burn, we’ll be burnt to death!”

the spies cried out again, spreading panic like a fire ravaging a field.

After all, the army was large.

There was no stopping it once it began to move.

The oil that had been poured on them wasn’t quite enough to burn them all to death, but no one was in their right mind. Many of the soldiers who had been relatively closer to the front of the army did not know that Sayle was alive and healthy yet, which caused for more panic.

Furthermore, they were pushed forward by the group that had come running against them and had no choice but to move forward whether they wanted to or not.

And so, fear spread to the group of soldiers spearheading the army, and they began to flee as well.

The rout had begun.

Head to Chandrys, our home! Sayle held his ground and shouted into the crowd to let his men know that he was alive, but his cries only reached those who were already near him.

“—Ugh!”

Sayle bit his lips and watched the soldiers of his army scramble over each other as they fled.

Rain’s objective was much too obvious.

They had inferred it before, but there was no doubt that Rain’s side was smaller in number. That was why Rain had planned ahead to prevent Sayle and Shing’s units from reconvening. He had planned a carefully thought out, but sly, attack on his already weakened enemy.

Sayle’s unit had suffered no actual damage, but there was nothing he could do about the state it was in.

It would be impossible to reorganize the army anytime soon.

(At the very least, though, I still have to go and save Junna!)

Sayle's resolve hadn't changed despite that his men were fleeing.

And so, he looked up with a hard look on his face.

Just then, he heard the roaring of countless horses galloping on the other side of the mountain of dirt.

— — *Junna!*

Rain threw his torch away behind him after confirming that Sayle's unit had begun their rout.

They had long since lost the ability to make sound decisions and were desperately running for their lives. He didn't care about them as long as they wouldn't get in his way. He could go back to his original plans now that he had rendered their cooperation with Shing impossible.

Next, Rain cast his eyes to the side opposite of where Sayle's unit was. Shing's unit was still in a state of confusion. In addition, the ambush troop spearheaded by Gazaram that he had prepared in advance was closing in on them.

As he'd expected, Gazaram's age wasn't just for show. Gazaram's timing was the definition of perfection, and the Chandry's army, which still had yet to recover from the shock of the cliff falling on them, could do little else but immediately prepare to flee as the full force of their unrest came into light.

As far as Rain could tell, there were already soldiers who were glancing at their sole escape route— —in other words, the branch road that split off from Dead Valley.

The branch road was practically calling out to them to escape toward it. It was the longer way around, but through it they would be able to escape to their home country, Chandrys.

Rain had prepared a large-scale trap there on their “escape route” in advance so that they would not turn on him in their desperate struggles. He had decided that this was the best way to achieve victory with the fewest losses.

It would be troubling for him if they managed to flee, though.

He waited for the right timing.

There were already soldiers below who had begun to escape to the branch road instead of waiting for Shing’s orders. They hadn’t been able to endure the pressure they felt as the Sunkwoll army closed in on them.

“Alright, Kris. It’s finally our turn to shine. Let’s go!”

Rain lightly mounted Kris and looked down. He calmly observed the chaos unfolding at the other end of the near-perpendicular cliff and waited for his chance.

It was likely to his benefit that he couldn’t feel fear during times like this.

Gazaram’s unit clashed with Shing’s and started a melee.

“Now!”

Rain gently kicked Kris’ flank and leapt off the cliff.

Shing was appalled.

Incidentally, the reason that he had seen something that scared him out of his wits in the first place was because he had never looked away from Rain despite the fact that there was a melee going on around him.

He had decided that he wouldn’t take his eyes off of Rain again, since the latter was so prone to doing the unforeseen. As it stood, Rain had apparently done something to Sayle and the others on the other side of the mound of earth, according to the countless horses he could hear galloping away.

He couldn't see anything from where he was, but he was sure that Rain had played a hand in it.

And now, Rain had astonishingly leapt off the cliff under Shing's careful watch.

That was all that Shing could make of it.

It was supposed to be impossible to climb down the near-vertical cliff, even on horseback.

If anyone did come down from the cliff, they could have only been described to have been "falling".

And yet——Rain did not fall for some reason.

It was almost as if there was some sort of trick to the hooves of Rain's white stead (which was still more plausible than Shing's next guess), or as if the horse had sprouted invisible wings from its body.

Rain galloped down the near-vertical cliff with the force of a surging wave. For a moment, Shing forgot about the battle around him as he witnessed the impossible sight of Rain defying the laws of gravity. In his forgetfulness, he became captivated by Rain's gallant figure as he approached the ground.

At that moment——

Rain opened his eyes wide at the sight of the melee below him and yelled loudly. His voice boomed across the entire battlefield.

It was as if time had stopped.

Everyone who had been fighting without realizing what was going on around them instinctively stopped moving and turned around as one.

And everyone, friend and foe alike, was captivated by the lone knight who was dashing down the cliff towering before them.

Then, Rain's white stead suddenly leapt despite the fact that it was still more than ten meters away from the ground.

It fell a distance that would have killed any normal horse and landed magnificently on the mountain of dirt. Then, it gathered up its strength and jumped again.

Rain and his horse leapt over the Chandrys army. They glided through the air so elegantly they could have been dancing in the sky and the tip of pike Rain held in his hand glistened. Everyone was rendered speechless as they fixed their eyes upon the scene before them.

Rain shouted at the soldiers, who looked like their souls had escaped their bodies, in a thunderous voice.

“You bastards get out of my wayyyyyyyyyyyy!!”

In an instant, everyone moved as if they had been kicked into action.

The area where Rain landed cleared like an ocean that had been split in two.

The knights of the Chandrys army forgot that they were in the middle of a battle. Not only did they not block the path of the enemy army’s supreme commander before them, but they went out of their way to make way for him.

The glint in Rain’s eyes, his shout, and his invisible but overwhelming drive. Everyone had been overawed by these things and no one intentionally moved to stop him.

On the contrary, even the Sunkwoll army had fallen into a state of petrification.

Shing was a little late in realizing that there was no one between himself and Rain to block the latter’s path.

Rain was rushing toward him without looking aside. He was glaring at Shing with his pike in his hand.

Shing finally returned to his proper senses.

He did as his instincts commanded and subconsciously turned his horse

around to flee to the branch road. He never made a conscious decision to flee and was only moving by reflex. Like his men, he too was overawed by Rain.

Shing was not a coward.

And yet, he became truly afraid as he fled and flattened down on his horse to desperately urge it faster.

He felt like some kind of outrageous monster was chasing after him.

“Hold it right thereeee!”

Rain yelled at him from behind. He continued,

“what’s with you?! Is barging into someone else’s kingdom with greater numbers the only thing you’re good at?! But when you’re faced with fighting someone you can’t hope to beat in single combat, all you do is sneak away! And you still call yourself a general?!”

“Kugh!”

Shing flew into a rage.

Objectively speaking, nothing that Rain said had been a lie. In fact, they had been exactly on the mark.

Which served to infuriate Shing all the more.

“Fine. I’ll take you on!!”

Shing turned his horse around almost desperately in order to face Rain. A few of Shing’s men ran through in between them. They had promptly turned their backs on the battle and were withdrawing from the battlefield, which meant that Shing’s unit was about to collapse soon.

Rain didn’t spare the small fry a second glance and brazenly said to Shing,

“hey now. There’s no way that someone who couldn’t beat Gunther could possibly be a match for me.”

You’re the one to stopped meeeee!

Shing screamed internally but managed to swallow it down. *Don't fall for his taunts! He'll catch up to me even if I ran anyway.*

At this point, all he could do was fight back even if it wouldn't change a thing. He responded,

“there's no need for chatter. Come!”

Rain charged at him horse and all as Shing readied his lance and prepared to die.

“I like your resolve.”

Somewhere inside, Shing felt like it was somebody else's problem as he heard something cutting through the wind. Or rather, all he could do was hear it. He was completely unable to catch sight of the pike as it twirled around like a waterwheel.

Rain's pike flashed and broke Shing's lance halfway in two. As Shing stared at his broken lance in blank amazement, his enemy's pike changed direction and its hilt was smashed against his forehead.

And just like that, Shing fainted.

↑ The original Japanese for Dead Valley is (枯れ谷, *karetani*), which combines together the Japanese words for “to wither, to dry up, to die” (枯れる, *kareru*) and “valley” (谷, *tani*). This sentence is playing with the fact that the valley had literally “dried up.”

Chapter 7: Sayle and Junna VS Rain

Part 1

“Whoopsie.”

Rain off-handedly picked up Shing’s body as the latter slanted from his seat on his horse and laid him in front across his own saddle.

In almost no time at all, he heard a shout.

“General Shing has been captureeed!”

Rain didn’t know if the shout had belonged to a considerate member of one of the spies he had slipped into the Chandrys army or an enemy soldier.

In any case, the shout acted as the trigger for the collapse of most of the Chandrys army. Many of the knights who were still fighting began to turn around their horses one after another to withdraw from the battlefield to the branch road.

The avoided Rain by a large margin as they escaped in droves. He didn’t have any intention of getting in their way, so Rain intentionally moved off to the side of the highway.

The enemy army passed by before him like a thick ribbon. There were many of them, but hardly any noticed that he was loitering off the side of the road. There usually weren’t many people who looked around in the middle of a rout.

In addition, Gazaram's booming voice echoed from the main section of the highway.

"Don't get yourselves killed for no reason! Victory's been decided! We won't stop you, so hurry up and flee. If you don't want to, then throw down your weapons and surrender! Surrender, surrender nowww!"

Rain smiled before he knew it.

Gazaram was just as used to battle as he'd expected. Perhaps he could say that Gazaram was good at reading the balance, as he had precisely and accurately read the flow of the battle from every aspect of the situation.

Even now, those who had continued to wield their spears and swords until the end were throwing down their weapons as if the old man's shout had become their saving grace.

Not all of the enemies had promptly run away.

They, the crowd of knights who couldn't find it in their conscience to abandon their commander and flee, would have likely fought to their deaths had Gazaram not called out to them.

They had chosen the path of "surrender" over abandoning Shing now that they knew the option was available to them.

"Alright. I guess that settles this."

Rain let out a small sigh and moved to return to the main road with Kris.

—However, it was too early to believe that the battle was over.

A sweet yell reached Rain's ears.

"M, Mortal Storm~~"

It was a docile voice that didn't seem to belong on a battlefield.

Or rather, it clearly belonged to a girl and not only did it sound adorable, but it sounded rather bewildered as well.

But, Rain felt a shiver run down his spine and promptly called out,
“jump, Kris!”

His partner’s reflexes (if that’s what he was supposed to call them) were outstanding. Just as Rain wished, Kris kicked off the earth and jumped high.

He heard a thunderous roar.

Rain looked down from up high in the sky to see a whirlwind with winds as violent as that of a tornado’s pass through below.

A magic attack!

Rain tightened his loosened nerves.

Furthermore.

The spell had ridiculous power despite what the sweet voice suggested and when he turned around, Rain saw that a group of enemy soldiers, including some who had already run fairly far, had all been blown away.

It had been as if they were merely leaves in the wind.

Rain, who had evaded the first attack, came back down to the ground while still riding Kris and braced himself anew as he turned back around in front of him.

A single girl was standing all alone on the highway’s main road. She had long, chestnut-colored hair and large black eyes that glistened as if they were moist.

She was standing right at the point where the branch road broke off from the main road in the shape of a ‘T’.

She was about fifteen meters away in terms of distance.

The girl looked flustered upon seeing that Rain had evaded her magic attack and looked around to her left and right.

But, unfortunately, all of her allies had already thrown down their weapons and were kneeling on the ground with their hands behind their heads.

At the moment, only the girl had any will to continue the battle.

— —I don't know the exact details, but I'm pretty sure that she's a Chandrys mage.

Rain imagined that she had simply been standing off in the corner of the road during the short fight. Luckily, no one had attacked her because she clearly didn't look the part of a warrior no matter how you looked at her.

And then, she had suddenly realized what position she was in as the battle began to conclude and, upon deciding that she had to fight as well, attacked Rain, who was right in front of her, with magic for the time being.

Which was all fine and well (no, it actually wasn't), but she had evidently failed to think about what to do after her attack. It was all too obvious that she wasn't used to fighting.

Rain swiftly inferred her circumstances, and before he could hurry and warn his allies— —

Gazaram's deep voice echoed out again, though he couldn't see the old man in person (since Rain was in the middle of the main road).

"Archery unit, put down your bows! Don't take aim! Don't aim for that girl! Leave her to the General!"

Hm~m.....good instructions, Gazaram.

That old man was a real great bargain.

I guess experience really does come with age.

Rain nodded to himself twice in succession.

It was nice that Gazaram was able to predict what he was thinking before receiving any orders. The old man was seriously useful to have around.

Incidentally——the ever diligent and serious girl was chanting runes with all her might even as Rain was carefreely lost in admiration.

Then, she called out in a flimsy voice that conveyed the fact that she didn't really want to be doing this.

"L, Lightning Sworddd~~!"

Contrary to what her lovely voice suggested, the amount of magic she output was no joke. In that moment, alarms bells sounded their warning again at maximum volume in Rain's mind.

Regardless of how she looked on the outside, the girl was without a doubt a super first-rate mage.

Brilliant 'swords of light accompanied by lightning' made from magic rushed at him.

His field of vision was filled with a white flash of light as the surrounding area whited out.

The atmosphere shivered from the sheer amount of heat that the swords of magic (or rather, spears) emitted.

The main current of magical energy carbonized all of the grass in its path pitch-black and stirred up wind as it charged straight ahead. Even the pebbles began to liquefy from the heat.

Rain didn't have time to dodge. The white-hot swords of light drew closer and attacked him while he was still riding Kris.

Splashh!

The defensive field Rain had inherited from the dragon activated automatically as it always did. It stopped the girl's magical attack and began to shine as it absorbed the magic.

——However.

The radiant, rainbow-colored field turned scarlet after resisting the girl's attack for half a second.....and readily shattered.

It had exceeded its absorption capacity.

“What!?”

Rain promptly gathered up magical power in his hands and stuck them out in front of them to create a transparent shield.

He barely made it in time.

The swords of light, which had lost neither their momentum nor their power, crashed into the shield and caused a large explosion.

The transparent field tremored and nearly vanished from the impact of the explosion. It had so much 'power' that even Rain was subconsciously forced to go all out.

Even Rain was a little relieved to know that he had successfully blocked the attack.

But even still..... thought Rain.

If she was able to break through my anti-magic field, which is equal to or stronger than a mythical beast's, that means that she wields enough 'power' to possibly harm a dragon if she really wanted to.

Then again, had she actually fought a mythical beast, it would have created a new shield like Rain had and it would have been a complete joke if she got in a lucky hit.

As their moniker as the strongest mythical beast suggested, dragons were not an easy species to defeat.

Even still, most normal people wouldn't even have the means to oppose

them, which ultimately meant that the girl was still a rare case.

Besides, it had truly been several years since anyone had broken through Rain's barrier field.

Rain dismounted from Kris, knowing that he would be at a disadvantage on horseback. He narrowed his eyes and released his magic. A bluish-white aura rose up from his black-clad figure.

Unfortunately, however, the girl had utterly failed to comprehend that she had made Rain get serious.

"Ah~~~~!?"

She made a noise that made Rain want to lose focus as she stared at him with her round eyes. She hadn't thought that her attack would ever be blocked..... else, it was possible that, failing to understand how powerful her attack had been, she was simply disappointed that it hadn't worked.

Anyhow, the girl's cute face crumpled into a frown, perhaps because she had become discouraged.

She looked around her surroundings in a flustered manner as if she was wondering what she should do. She looked like she was searching for something.....or someone.

Sure enough, she called out, "b, big brother~" to someone.

"Hey now! What's this with calling out for your "big brother~" after picking a fight with me, huh?!"

Rain griped. He continued,

"I just remembered. Your name is Junna, isn't it? I received intel earlier about a genius mage who made full use out of the name."

Junna (probably) flinched audibly and stepped back. Evidently, Rain's menacing attitude had scared her. She was quite the rude girl who refused to say a word after forcibly making the preemptive strike.

Gazaram, Leni, and Rain's other comrades finally gathered around Junna and looked between her and Rain in amusement. Even the enemy soldiers who had surrendered and were on their knees had somehow joined the gallery.

Gazaram rubbed his stubble and laughed as if the entire ordeal was someone else's problem.

"Man, you sure are popular, General. You're a lot different from me when I was younger."

"Do I *look* like I'm flirting?!! I'll dock your pay later, damnit!"

Rain yelled back in a huff.

These guys don't look like they really understand how amazing her magic attack was since they were in a blind spot earlier.

Then, ignoring the tension in the air that had begun to die down, Junna held up her magic staff once more.

Her delicate frame was covered by a white magical aura as if to rival Rain's. The snow-white robe she wore billowed from an invisible power as she closed her eyes and concentrated.

The irresponsible gallery aside, not even Rain stopped Junna as she began chanting.

The spectators, starting with Gazaram, knew that Rain would do something about her while Rain himself had his own motives.

——Which was to say that, to be serious, Rain could have ended the match long ago had he wanted to.

This was because, sword skills aside, Rain had an absolute advantage over Junna as rune masters.

As for what that advantage was?

All rune masters required casting time to chant their incantations if they wanted to release a powerful magic attack. This was true even of genius mages like Junna. Or, at the very least, it should have been.

This was why mages had suffered so many losses that they had nearly gone extinct during the war with daemons long ago. It was due to the war that there were so few mages even to this day.

After all, daemons could use magic without having to chant.

Mages had suffered a handicap even on top of the natural disparity in magic between the two groups. They were completely helpless without a warrior's support.

However——Rain was not affected by the vulnerability known as “cast time”. He had been, once, but had overcome that weakness when he became a Dragon Slayer.

Just as dragons, the strongest mythical beasts, could freely use magic without having to chant a rune each and every time, Rain, too, was free from the shackles known as “incantations”.

He was able to activate magic whenever he wished to as long as he still had magic and his capacity for it was phenomenal.

To put it bluntly, the fight would be over as soon as Rain closed the distance between them while Junna was chanting.

——Ignoring the rude gallery that was blankly watching along from around her.

Still, Rain went out of his way not to do that and waited for Junna to finish.

It wasn't that he was going easy on her or anything.

It was simply that he thought——he could couldn't call it a victory if he fought against her with his sword.

Rain had no intention of casting aside his obsession with victory even if others called him stubborn for it.

Now, hit me with everything you've got!

A daring glint shone in his black eyes as he watched over Junna. Rain increased the volume of magic within himself as he waited.

For the time being, he told Gazaram and the other curious onlookers, “it depends on the direction the magic goes, but you might get caught up in it! Stay

back!”

Everyone stepped back without a word of complaint, perhaps because they had felt the extraordinary atmosphere around them.

Junna’s song-like chanting continued:

“——Fenrir, the White Beast of the Great Snow Field, and Geirut, the Devil of Ice and Snow. Materialize the power to overcome them here in this land! As one who believes in the almighty mana, I am an apostle who freely wields the great magics.



“I pray that you freeze this place for all eternity. Transform the world into a white graveyard by the power of the mana that dwells within me. Freeze everything and protect me~”

And so, Junna had finished her incantation.

“Ice Age Strike!”

A freezing gale whipped up where she stood when Junna pointed her magic staff at Rain.

It crackled as it froze the highway.

Thick ice formed over the earth as it froze instantaneously and the ice proliferated before their eyes. The ice moved in once direction —that is, towards Rain.

Junna’s spell created not only the ice but had caused the gale as well.

Countless blades of ice formed in the freezing wind and snow and surged forward while dyeing their surroundings white. They closed the distance in a breath as they tried to trap Rain alive in a coffin of ice.

“Interesting! It’s a match to see who’s the better mage!”

O flame!

Rain cried out as if he was scolding himself.

Naturally, Rain had no cast time and was able to use his magic freely.

A burst of hellfire blossomed like a large, ominous flower appeared before Rain like a shield.

The ultra-hot flames materialized by magic advanced as they swirled like a whirlwind.

It transformed the air into a storm of scorching heat that rushed along with

the flames.

It crashed into the oncoming winds of ice and snow from head on.

The clash created a sound like the sound made when red-hot iron was dipped into water——but hundreds of times louder.

Thick steam that could have been mistaken for smoke rose up toward the heavens.

The two opposing attributes that had been brought forth by magic, the extreme white cold and the ultimate crimson heat, clashed and struggled in between the two mages.

This was more of a match between two genius-level mages than a rivalry between ice and fire. The mage with less magic would end up getting hit directly by the other's attack.

The two powers were in perfect equilibrium for the time being.

——However.

That balance was only maintained for only a few more seconds. Junna began to breathe heavily with her shoulders heaving as she expended vast amounts of magical energy and her willpower exhausted in face of Rain's ever-increasing magic.

The tip of her staff trembled and her legs wavered unreliably.....

She was near her limit.

You picked the wrong opponent, Rain thought.

While there did exist a difference in their capacities of magic, the fact that she wasn't used to battle posed the bigger problem. In other words, it was the difference in their experiences. That, and the difference in their mental strength.

She would likely grow to become an even more fearsome mage in the future if she gained more experience and polished her skills.

Rain had no doubt of this because she was able to freely cast a spell that had been touted as one of the highest-level spells in the golden age of magic even as inexperienced as she currently was.

She was undoubtedly one of the strongest mages on the continent in all of history.

She totally didn't look the part, though.

“——Let me be serious. I think that you're an amazing mage for your age. Your power truly deserves to be called 'genius'.”

Rain used magic to ensure that Junna could hear him whisper.

His opponent looked at him even as she struggled to breathe.

“But, at the very least, I know of two mages who are better than you. The first is the women who taught me 'magic'. And the second——”

Rain opened his black eyes wide and released the full might of his magic.

“Is non other than myself.”

In an instant, the writhing flames, having received multiple times the magic they had been getting, pushed against the wall of ice and broke through.

The overwhelming whirlpool of flames took the form of a crimson dragon and rushed for Junna.

“——! No!”

Junna watched the burst of flames coming for her and let out a small shriek.

She had even forgotten to put up a shield.

It was Rain who panicked more in the moment.

He cut down his spell in a hurry and, at the same time, put up a shield in front of the girl for her. It was simple enough, even with the distance between them.

Rain somehow managed to stop the raging hellfire with his newly created barrier.

He had stopped the magic that he himself had cast.....

He felt ridiculous, like he was performing a one man show, but it wasn't as if he could have just let it be either.

".....Phew~. Don't just suddenly cancel your magic like that! That was dangerous just now, you know."

Junna didn't respond.

She simply sank down and stared back at Rain. Eventually, tears began to well up in her large eyes. Her magic staff flopped down from her hands.

"Hold on a sec. Hey, calm down. It's not like anything happened."

He was too late.

Junna covered her face with her hands and began to cry. Her sobbing sounded so sorrowful that Gazaram, Yuri, Selphie, and Leni rushed to her side in an instant. They began to repeatedly offer her words of consolation.

No one was worried about Rain.

Rather, Yuri even grumbled to Rain, who had jogged over, in a quiet voice.

"Gee~z. You made her cry."

"Me?! Am I the bad guy here?!"

How vexing it was!

Rain scowled and pointed at his own chest.

"Save for the last part, all I did was avoid or block her attacks! I'm technically the victim here?"

"You're strong, General, so there's no helping the fact that you become the bad guy at times like this."

Even Senoa, who had arrived late to the scene, responded in a cheeky manner.

Apparently, everyone had sympathized with Junna.

“.....Is this what they call the solitude of the strong? This isn’t worth it at all.”

Rain grumbled to himself as he, too, approached Junna. As he did, he saw that Selphie’s sword was covered in blood and the sight of it pulled at his heartstrings.

While her sword, proof that she had fought fiercely, was proof enough, he could tell from the way she was crouching down and consoling Junna with all her might that she had overcome a huge wall.

Even if it was impossible for her to get used to killing people because of her personality, it was a good thing that she had been able to cross at least one hurdle.

However, Rain had mixed feelings about it and didn’t feel like being happily approving of this kind of growth.

Selphie knew what it felt like to lose someone dear firsthand. He didn’t want for her to enter the path of fighting. Still, he knew that he was being selfish.

Rain shook his head clear of idle thoughts and bent down.

“Hey, you alright?”

Junna stopped crying when he reached out his hand. She stare~~~~d at him with her black eyes filled to the brim with tears.

There was an acute glint in her eyes that reminded him of a baby squirrel born in the wilderness that was warily watching a human for the first time.

It was strange how he began to feel that he was in the wrong after meeting her gaze.

Rain consciously made sure to speak to her kindly upon seeing how her tiny frame had stiffened up as she squatted on the ground.

“.....It’s alright. I won’t do anything. Not to you and not to your brother.”

Then, Junna’s eyes grew 1/5th times larger.

Rain wondered if she had noticed as well. *No, that’s probably not the case. If she had, she’d be looking at him.*

“My goal here wasn’t to wage war. Sorry for surprising you, though I was only

trying to stop you.”

He slowly reached out his hand.

Junna stared hard at his fingertips. She was still drawing back.

Still, she loosened up when Rain smiled. As delicate of a child as she was, she properly understood that his smile was not a fake one.

In the best-case scenario, it meant that she had accepted his sincerity.

Gently, ever so gently, Rain placed his hand on top of the long black hair on her head.

“You were trying to help your brother out in any way you could, right? You’re such a good girl.”

Junna’s cheeks flushed as he slowly pat her head. She nodded ever so slightly.

The people around them smiled in relief after watching her.

Now, all that’s left is big bro who’s looking this way.

Rain casually waited for the right time——

——Or at least that’s what he had intended to do until he looked up to see someone familiar up ahead and furrowed his brows.

At the other end of his gaze were a few men who looked clearly different from the other enemy knights. They were probably mercenaries, going by their dirty leather armor and shamelessly scary faces.

Chandrys had evidently let money speak for itself in her efforts to gather up numbers and had hired a good number of mercenaries into her army.

That in and of itself wasn’t all that rare, as Sunkwoll did it too, but.....*still, he’s*
——

The man jerked to the other direction upon receiving Rain’s hard stare. But, even still, there was no way that Rain would mistake his vulgarly frightful face.

Even with the hand towel tied around his head or the strange new facial hair

he was spouting, it wasn't enough that Rain would mistake is ugly face.

Besides, the fact that he was dressed up as a mercenary in the midst of the strictly uniformed Chandrys knights made him stand out all the more.

".....Hey you. What are you so obviously ignoring me for? I'm talking to you, the guy who just turned around with the oily face!!"

The familiar-looking squalid man let out a small shriek and covered his mouth with both hands in a panic.

He shook his stubbled head vigorously in denial when Rain approached him in large strides.

Still, his face was as horribly oily as ever, though it hadn't been that long since Rain had last seen him. *Seriously, when was the last time he washed his face? I don't think even people with a lot of fat get this gross, normally.*

"Hey, there's no point in shaking your head! It hasn't even been two months since you tried to assassinate me! Like hell I'd forget you!"

The oily-faced man's clouded, beady eyes began to tear up.

Still, why is it cute when a girl makes that face when it makes me want to punch him when he does it?

Rain nonchalantly placed a hand on the hilt of his magic sword as a silly thought ran through his head.

"I let you go free the other day, and yet here you are before me again. Just what are you trying to do, you bastard?! Did someone ask you for something again, huh? Say something!"

When Rain pointed at him, the oily-faced man, still on his knees in surrender, pointed at his own mouth and shook his head.

"What? You can't speak?"

The oily-faced man nodded twice in affirmation.

"Liar. I can see right through that charade of yours. You have until I count to two to speak up! I'll punch you if you don't!!"

Wow, that's short.

Not only did the oily-faced man, but Rain's men and the prisoners of war all also looked like they wanted to say the same thing.

Rain counted down, ignoring their reaction. The oily-faced man opened his mouth in a hurry when Rain finished counting half a second later.

Rain and all of the spectators listened closely to what he had to say.

"I, I, crost the sea, came from far far away country. This continent's words, I don't little understand, yes?!"

Silence filled the area.

Yuri, who was the only one who found it funny for some reason, laughed a little from behind them.

However, most of everyone else became suddenly exhausted and unamused, and Rain only grew more annoyed.

His cheeks twitched as he said,

"what do you mean, "this continent's words, I don't little understand, yes!?" Are you making fun of me?!"

He drew his sword and swung it down. The oily-faced man dodged it by falling over and sprang back up as if his behind had caught on fire.

He wailed in great indignation.

"H, hey! That swing was serious! How were you gonna take responsibility if it'd hit?! Besides, you said you'd punch me, not swing your sword on me! Enough of this nonsense, damnit!"

"Shut it! See? You can speak just fine! Besides, what's~ this crap about being from a faraway country when you obviously look like you're from the area? Think a little before you start making things up!"

“Urk..... I thought I could trick you after changing up my face a bit.”

“Are you stupid?!”

Rain spat out at the oily-faced man’s vexation. He continued,

“everyone else aside, did you really think you could trick *anyone* with that filthy face of yours? Be more aware of yourself!”

“W, wait. You’ll understand if you let me talk! I was just trying to put food on the table as a mercenary! It’s not like I resented you or that I thought I could get back at you if I was lucky to anything like that!”

The oily-faced man closed his mouth as Rain, magic sword in hand, silently cornered him against the mountain of dirt.

He suddenly burst into tears, likely because he finally thought that things were getting *really* bad for him.

“C, c’mon, wait. Despite how I look, I have eight, no sixteen kids waiting for me at home! Please let me go!”

“Like I said before, your math doesn’t add up! Besides, that’s one more than it was last time!”

Rain readied his magic sword high above his head.

“Waah! N, no! Another one was born since last time, and I have a lot of twins and triplets— —”

“Quit lying!”

Just as Rain was about to jump the man, a bright flash of light suddenly burst from up above their heads.

Part 2

——Before Rain's reunion with the oily-faced man.

Sayle had climbed half-way up the mountain of fallen dirt and was staying as still as the large rocks around him.

He would have naturally been sighted immediately if that was all he did, so he had hidden himself using magic that "concealed one's figure."

Sayle was technically able to use magic as well.

Junna and Rain's individual match had just ended as Sayle watched over them from the mountain of dirt, and his concern for the Chandrys soldiers had all consolidated into his concern for his younger sister.

Still.....I'd never thought that Junna could lose.

Sayle let out a soft sigh.

He had heard that Rain was able to use magic, but that Rain was this powerful as a mage had been completely outside of his expectations. Speaking of the unexpected, he hadn't thought that his sister would have attacked first with magic either.....*so does that mean that the pressure Rain gave off was just that strong?*

Anyhow, the clash of magic from earlier had scared him half to death. He had almost rushed out screaming when Junna had sat down and was about to take a direct hit.

He was relieved from the bottom of his heart to know that his younger sister was safe.

Still——Rain was probably mistaken about something, as that hadn't been the

limits of Junna's 'power.' It had simply been the upper limits of the power that his sister could currently control.

Sayle had only seen it once before, but he knew that his younger sister was capable of releasing even stronger magical attacks if she let her magic run rampant.

But he was nevertheless undoubtedly glad that the match was over because it was much better that Junna didn't let that happen. Besides, he felt that Rain, too, still had magic to spare.

If two extremely powerful rune masters fought to the full extent of their power, it was extremely probably that one or both of them would end up dead. Sayle, who had been spectating the match, did not wish for that to happen. Especially since one of the two participants of said match was his younger sister.

Rain had captured both Shing and Junna without hurting them. Sayle's hostility toward Rain, which had been low to begin with, grew even lower because of this.

That being said, it wasn't as if he could just fold his arms and look on while doing nothing when his comrades and family were captured by Rain.

— I have to rescue them!

Rain was crouching down in front of his sister at the moment. He was probably consoling her. If he would only get a little closer to the mountain of dirt that Sayle was hiding on, Sayle felt like he could launch a surprise attack without hurting Rain too badly and take back Shing and Junna while he was at it.....

Even Sayle knew that his plan was a hit-or-miss, but it was better than running away alone. *I'll launch a surprise attack on him, take him hostage, and rescue Mr. Shing and Junna!*

But there's still one problem.

Sayle, still crouched down on the slope of the mountain of dirt, licked his upper lip.

He didn't have very much confidence— —that Rain truly hadn't noticed him.

Concealment magic was able to erase one's presence as well.

That was why there was no way that Rain should have noticed him, in theory. Even his sister hadn't realized that he was here. It should be all right.....*should*.

*But if Rain's ignoring this mountain of dirt on purpose— —*Sayle could not help but seriously doubt. That Rain had noticed he was here but was ignoring him on purpose.

And then, Rain would periodically look up at the slope with sharp eyes as if to say that he wasn't letting his guard down in the slightest.In glances.

But Rain's prickling caution had to truly, truly, be the truth. He truly did not seem to have realized that Sayle was there.

But, what if Rain is a more cunning man than I'd thought?

He isn't some kind of all bark and no bite blockhead who doesn't even know how to hold a sword properly.

He's a warrior who's lived through numerous battles, seen numerous scenes of carnage, and used to be a mercenary.

Wouldn't it make more sense to think that he's just putting up an act? That he's pretending not to notice to deceive me?

Am I about to jump in like an idiot to where a Dragon Slayer, of all things, is lying in wait?

— —*Shit!*

Even if I am, it's not like I can just run!

Sayle bit his lips and observed Rain, who alone was wearing regular black clothes despite the cold weather. There would be no point in taking any

hostage other than Rain.

He had to decide.

And, he had to aim for the best possible chance.

Even if Joe Lamberck had warned him not to fight Rain, there was no way that he could pull back now.

Eventually, Rain saw someone who looked like they were an old acquaintance of his and began arguing with them. It ended up in something of a fight where Rain even drew his sword (though Sayle didn't think he was being serious).

Then, Rain had cornered his acquaintance all the way to below where Sayle was waiting. Location-wise, there was no chance better than this.

Whatever, I'm desperate here!

Sayle resolved himself and chanted runes in a quiet voice. He cast magic to control his fall first and the cast light magic temporarily blind his enemies.

A vast amount of light lit up the area as Sayle drew his sword and jumped off the slope.

However, Sayle quickly realized that he had made a mistake in his calculations.

He had initially closed his eyes so that he wouldn't be affected by the magical flash of light that he himself had cast, but Sayle saw that Rain had his eyes closed when he cracked his eyes open half-way as he fell.

The reason Rain had done so was obviously because he had decided to face his enemy without relying on his vision, rather than to recklessly move about blind.

Sayle inferred two things from this.

The first was that Rain was a warrior who was able to fight using only his hearing and ability to perceive presences, and the second was that Sayle's attempt at a surprise attack had been a wasted effort.

He noticed me long ago!

His opponent was outrageously skilled. To think that Rain's caution had all been just an act!

But even still——

Sayle was already mid-air with his magic sword drawn and poised to strike. He followed through with his attack even though he was aware of his failure half on sheer instinct.

And, Rain moved to evade him leisurely with his eyes still closed.

He really did look to be at ease.

He had predicted the attack and was fully prepared for it. Moreover, his reflexes were clearly several levels above Sayle's and it was no trouble at all for him to avoid Sayle's attack——or at least it shouldn't have been.

Junna had rapidly chanted a rune.

She was so fast that even Sayle could not hear what she had said, but her objective in casting the magic was soon made clear. The weeds by Rain and the oily-faced man's feet suddenly grew at a rapid pace and wrapped around their ankles.

Their bodies were pulled together as the weeds tightened up at once.

Rain's expression hardly changed.

Confusion, fear, anger, despair.....none of the feelings that would have arisen on a normal person's face in this situation appeared on his.

He simply opened his eyes with a truly nonchalant mien that seemed to express his annoyance at how things had taken a slight unexpected turn as he thrust the oily-faced man away. He tried to get away himself soon afterward——but...

As expected, he hadn't made it in time.

After all, it had all happened in less than a blink of an eye. Sayle, while just as surprised as Rain, still obeyed his instincts and followed through on his attack.

However, he ended up cutting Rain more deeply than he had planned because of the latter's unexpected movements.

Sayle had planned to knock Rain unconscious with the flat of his sword if it was possible, but his actions were influenced not only by the unexpected events but also by the sheer amount pressure that Rain exerted.

As a result, he ended up cutting into Rain, who was wearing no armor, diagonally from below his chest to his stomach.

A spray of blood drew a crimson arc in the air.

The weeds that acted as shackles on Rain's ankles burst apart and scattered, likely by Rain's doing, the moment that Sayle landed.

Without the slightest delay, Rain, who had now become free of his bonds, threw his body backwards. He somersaulted backwards multiple times with amazing dexterity and landed only after putting some distance between himself and Sayle. He resumed his stance of pointing his sword at his enemy's eyes.

It had been so fast that his movements reminded Sayle of a sudden gust of wind.

Though he never planned for one to begin with, Sayle would have hit only air if he had gone back in for a second attack.

Sayle surely would have doubted that his first attack had actually hit if Rain's had not nearly fallen on one knee.

He's still human, even if he's a Dragon Slayer.

Even Rain gets hurt like this if he miscalculates an attack.

But still——Sayle thought at the same time.

He might have reached the highest peaks that humanity can ever hope to attain. Sayle seriously believed this after seeing Rain's movements.

The people around them finally began to stir.

The first person to react was one of Rain's aides named Gazaram (probably), who yelled, "don't just stand there! Close the branch road so they can't escape!" in a sharp voice.

A beat later, a blonde girl and a black-haired girl let out small screams. Their voices were soaked in disbelief. Evidently, Sayle had done something that was thought to have been impossible.

The enemy knights, while visibly confused, obeyed their orders and quickly made a wall in front of the branch road. Junna had been pushed down and had her mouth covered by another girl. "Mmph~, mmph~!" she moaned as she struggled.

Gazaram had already drawn his sword and was moving closer.

"I'm fine! Leave this to me!"

Rain stopped him with a strong voice.

Gazaram stopped walking and looked to his master with a difficult expression on his face. He didn't lower his sword.

"But.....your wound. That's probably hit through to your organs?"

"I'll be fine. I stopped the bleeding. My movements have only become about thirty percent duller than usual. I still have about two minutes until I get to the point where I can't do battle. That's more than enough time."

Gazaram stared hard at Rain. For about five seconds.

".....Understood. But I'm jumping in if I think that things are getting dangerous. I've decided to die at your side. So I can't have you die ahead of me."

"Enough with that nonsense. It'll just be a bother for me if an old fart like you died before my eyes. An aide is supposed to take over for his commander. Like hell I'll have you die before me."

The two exchanged something like a wry smile before Rain turned to Sayle.

“You’re sister’s pretty good. It looks like she’s able to cast spells without incantations depending on the spell.”

At Rain’s words, Sayle finally realized that his sister hadn’t chanted runes earlier. She had subconsciously cried out in her worry for him. She had undoubtedly realized that the explosion of light had been created by him. And then, she had immediately used magic.

Sometimes even Sayle forgot that his younger sister was able to cast low-leveled magic without chanting. After all, it was normally impossible.

But, Rain didn’t seem surprised at all as he continued,

“you were planning on taking me hostage before escaping. It’s not a bad idea.”

“There’s nothing good or bad about it since you’d already figured it out. — But before that...!”

Sayle spat out in a hurry. He continued,

“your aide is right! I only meant to cut you a little, but it ended up being a lot worse. You have to hurry and get yourself treated or it’ll be too late!”

Rain looked at Sayle in exasperation and shook his head.

“You’re a strange one. Doesn’t this work out for you anyway? This might be the perfect chance to take me hostage, you know.”

“W, well, yeah, but...! It’s not like I want you to die or anything. I just wanted to take my younger sister and comrades and get out of here!”

Rain laughed.

He laughed while showing off his white teeth in an absolute refusal to compromise.

“What a shameless wish you have there. Well, go ahead and try your best. But it’ll be pretty hard to capture me, you know.”

Sayle stared directly at the stubborn warrior’s black eyes in disbelief.

Just what on earth is he thinking?

“.....Are you seriously going to fight? I can already see how this’ll end, even if

you're a Dragon Slayer. It's only a matter of time until you aren't able to move anymore. But more importantly, your life will be in danger if you don't get treated soon. Please, just come with us. I'll have my sister tend to your wound on the road. And you'll be released soon."

A girl who looked like she was a squire reacted to Sayle's words by calling out, "Lord Rain!" in a noticeably loud voice.

She looked incredibly worried as she tried to run up to Rain, but Rain stopped her by raising a hand.

"I'm fine, Selphie. It'll be over soon, so you just stay there and watch,"

Rain said in a rather kind tone and silently turned back to Sayle. He continued, "you can already see how this'll end, was it? You don't understand. You don't understand what it means to be defeated in the truest sense of the word."

Rain looked at Sayle with envy for some reason. He continued,

"well, I suppose you'd be happier never knowing."

Red drops of blood began to trickle down from his bloodied stomach down to the ground again. There was a limit to how long you could stop an open wound from bleeding with willpower alone. It was strange that Rain was still even able to stand.

"I don't understand what you're saying. But more importantly, you have to get treated! You said you'd be good for two minutes earlier, and there's only half a minute of that left!"

"I know. That's why we'll cut the conversation here."

Just then, Rain's body suddenly blurred.

Sayle realized belatedly that his opponent had broken out into a dash upon seeing a small lump of dirt that Rain had kicked up as he kicked against the earth.

Indeed, even with Sayle's eyes, he had seriously thought that Rain had

vanished for a brief moment.

Naturally, that was not the case.

Sayle's eyes had simply been unable to keep up. There was a limit to what the human eye could capture accurately in terms of movement.

And Rain had surpassed that limit all too easily.

The black shadow dashed forth with a bluish magical sword in hand, not unlike Sayle's own. His black hair fluttered a bit as he raised his magic sword up from below with minimal movement. He moved like a snake rearing its head to strike.

There had been a decent amount of distance between them just a moment ago, but now, Rain was swinging his sword down right before Sayle's eyes.

The wind whistled slightly as the magic sword closed in on top of Sayle with a tail of bluish light following behind it. It's bright blue magical aura burned into Sayle's eyes painfully.

This is thirty percent slower than normal for him?

You've gotta be kidding me!!

Sayle somehow managed to repel away Rain's sword with his own.

But, with a light flick of the wrist, Rain's sword that Sayle had repelled abruptly changed directions like it was alive and came back at Sayle to rend him from the side. The change had been made astonishingly suddenly and with outrageous speed.

Sayle moved his feet almost purely by instinct and deftly evaded the second attack. He was only able to move his body without thinking because he had been a mercenary for a long time. Then, acting again by his warrior's instinct, he leapt in order to create some distance between himself and Rain.

However, Rain reacted immediately despite the fact that Sayle had moved without thinking at all. Rain moved to closed the distance between them again

and refused to allow Sayle the time to adjust his footing.

Sayle leapt backward while Rain leapt forward.

They moved as if they were famous dancers dancing a partnered dance as Rain refused to allow Sayle to put any distance between them.

Shit, I can't get away!

What a guy! I didn't show any signs of jumping this way, so how is he able to perfectly keep up with me?!

If this is talent too, then he's a much more incredible opponent than I'd originally thought he was!

It wasn't the time to be impressed. Rain twisted his magic sword mid-air, leaving a flashing afterimage in its wake. Sayle was able to catch this attack too, but he lost his balance because he had yet to land.

Sayle was slammed to the ground and began to roll before he could even cry out in pain. He rolled and tried to somehow regain his posture. However, his vision was suddenly filled with Rain's leg coming in for a kick when he was half-way up.

Sayle was kicked. Sayle was kicked *hard*. He was able to roll out of it, but the impact of the blow had forced out all of the air from his lungs.

Then, Rain jumped into the air again and leapt upon him. Sayle saw just two things in his dimming field of vision. They were Rain's magic sword, which was poised to thrust at him, and the red color of the blood dripping down from Rain's abdomen.

Sayle didn't have the time to get back up.

He raised his own sword in a daze.

The two magic swords crossed. One of them made a shallow cut on Rain's cheek, while the other—

Sayle gulped.

The tip of Rain's magic sword was placed directly at the base of his throat. Rain, who had ended up straddling him, quietly said,

"and victory's been decided."

".....I regret to say you're right."

Then, Rain's face twisted ever so slightly. It was probably from the pain.

Underneath his pained breaths, Rain said,

"you're too much of a nice guy. You can't be considerate of me when we're fighting.It would've ended just the same even if you'd fought seriously, but with your skills, you would have been able to put up more of a fight."

"You're wrong. I couldn't afford to be considerate of you at all."

"Nope, my eyes aren't wrong. You just haven't realized it for yourself."

Rain paused as his posture slowly began to crumble.

"H, hey. Whoa, I think I can see your intestines——"

"General!"

Rain's comrades came flocking to him with the person he had called Gazaram earlier at the lead. Sayle called out loudly for his younger sister as Rain tried to get up again despite everything.

"Hey, Junna! Hurry up and heal him!"

"Y, yeah!"

Junna trotted over and stooped down next to Rain.

Rain looked up and absentmindedly said,

"ah~, I've lost all motivation now that the battle's over.Plus, it hurts like hell."

A flood of voices suddenly filled the air.

They were mostly from a group of girls.

Sayle didn't really know the particulars, but Rain was evidently pretty popular.

"General, how could you do something so reckless right in front of me?! I can't have you do that!"

"Lord Rain, Lord Raain!"

"Yep, it's wide open. I seriously think I might be able to see your guts.....and it looks pretty painful."

.....Upon listening, Sayle realized that there was one curious onlooker who didn't really seem that worried at all.

Sayle forgot what kind of position he was in and said,

"you can't do that! Clear away for a bit. Hurry, Junna. Use healing magic!"

In any event, Rain thought that it wasn't too bad since he was spared from having to use healing magic on himself.

Junna sighed in relief after managing to close the wound. She looked down and then dropped her head low.

".....I'm sorry. I only meant to restrain you..... I never thought it'd end up like this."

But Rain wasn't angry in the slightest.

He reached out with his right hand, but then changed to his left after realizing that it was covered red with blood. Then, he pat Junna on the head as he'd done earlier.

"It's alright. You were just trying to help your bro, so you don't need to feel bad about it. Besides, I make it a rule not to get upset at every little thing a cute girl does."

Gratitude filled Junna's eyes as she peeked up.

Sayle then quickly asked in a voice free of anxiety, perhaps because he was

relieved as well,

“uh~. So, what’s gonna happen to us? You went out of your way to capture us, so that means that you’re not planning to kill us.....right?”

“Yeah, about that. Actually— —”

Then, Rain sprang up and looked around. He continued,

“hey, where’d the oily guy go?”

Leni shrugged and pointed to the other side of the highway.

When Rain looked to where Leni was pointing, he saw that the tiny figure of the filthy man in question was already quite the distance away and was raising his fist while on horseback.

“You asshole! I ain’t afraid of you at all, you hear?! I’ll show you one dayyy! And don’t let it get to your head just ‘cause you’re a little popular! I ain’t jealous of you at all!”

This pissed Rain off quite a bit.

The oily-faced man immediately fled with a cloud of dust stirring up behind him, perhaps because he sensed that Rain was about to call for Kris.

“How naïve. Do you really think you can get away from me and Kris? I make it a rule not to go easy on men!”

“That’s not the problem here!”

Sayle’s and Leni’s voices overlapped.

After they exchanged looks, Sayle said,

“please focus on postwar matters for the time being. Especially in regards to what you’re going to do with us. On that note, I humbly ask that you treat us kindly.”

Sayle spoke in a joking manner, but his gaze glanced to Junna, who had nestled up to him, in worry.

Rain reluctantly gave up on his pursuit of the oily-faced man and took a sweeping look over his surroundings.

Then, in a loud voice so everyone could hear, he said,

“I was planning to let you guys go after the war’s over either way. I’ll have you stay at my castle as guests-cum-prisoners of war, but I don’t plan on causing you any discomfort.”

“You’ll let us go free even if Sunkwoll loses?”

“Yeah. Regardless of how the war ends. I’ll take responsibility and promise you that.”

Sayle placed a hand on his chest and sighed.

All things despite, he had been worried for his younger sister.

“Is that.....so? But——”

He tilted his head to the side and continued,

“what was your objective? I felt like you specifically planned things out so that both sides only took minimal damage in our battle earlier.....”

Rain stared hard into Sayle’s face.

“I just wanted Folnier to notice something.”

“——Notice what?”

“That she’s fighting the wrong opponent. Folnier came over to Sunkwoll the other day, didn’t she? What did she come here for?”

Realization spread slowly across Sayle’s visage.

As did a faint smile.

“.....I see. So that’s why you went out of your way to make sure that we didn’t suffer any significant losses either.”

——*But.*

Sayle tilted his head again and argued vehemently,

“what if Her Majesty still wishes to fight Sunkwoll regardless?

“Her Majesty doesn’t like to lose. She might decide to be stubborn even if she understands the rights and wrongs of the situation now that we’ve come this far.”

“Then there’s no helping it at that point. We’ll just have to fight back with everything we’ve got too,”

Rain answered readily.

They heard a new shout from afar when Sayle tried to ask another question.

A knight was galloping toward them on a horse.

He looked like an ally from his uniform.

Rain signaled his allies to make way for the messenger and wait for his arrival.

“General, this is where you were——a, and what happened with that wound?!”

The messenger, who had approached while still on his horse, looked down at Rain, who was sitting down covered in blood, and was scared out of his wits.

Rain made the most composed-looking face he could and waved his hand.

“Yeah~, don’t worry about it. It’s closed up already. It’ll heal soon.....and more importantly, did something happen at the castle?”

“Uh, no sir. That’s not why I’m——. Are you really all right? What happened to the battle?”

“It’s over. We won, of course. You don’t need to worry, so hurry up and tell me why you’re here.”

“Yessir.....it appears that congratulations are in order.”

The messenger dismounted, still mystified, and handed Rain a folded letter he brought out of his chest. He explained,

“it’s a letter from Her Highness. She instructed me to make sure to hand it to you in person.”

“Hm?”

Rain opened up the folded piles of paper and was surprised by the length of

the letter. She had written quite a lot.....and the letter was quite long.

He read the words that Shelfa had neatly written in girlish handwriting that was very characteristic of her. His subordinates tried to secretly sneak behind him part-way through, so he hid the contents from them as he read the rest. He heard someone say that he was being stingy~ but ignored them.

It wasn't as if he could just show them something that the princess herself had written.

Rain scratched his head after he finished reading through the long letter a while later.

“Hmm~m?”

“What is it, General?”

Leni asked impatiently.

The others apparently shared his sentiments as their expressions pressed Rain to hurry up and tell them what the letter had been about.

“Well.....it's not like anything really happened. Though the letter was still pretty long. But in conclusion...”

“In conclusion?”

Leni urged him on.

Rain smiled wryly and replied,

“well, she took an extremely roundabout way to say that she wanted me home soon.”

Rain thought that the way she had refrained from stating her feelings plainly was Shelfa's way of “holding back”.

However, Rain's audience, who had been hyped up about the letter, suddenly became drained.

“I envy you, General. Someone so lovely cares so much about you.”

“Hey Leni, don't go around saying rash things like that. What if someone takes you seriously!?”

“Well, either way, isn’t it all— —”

True? Leni finished silently by shrugging.

But, regardless of the veracity of the situation, it still wasn’t a good idea be careless about what one said about their liege.

Leni could be difficult at times because he was too indifferent about such matters.

Rain frowned and gently got up.

He glanced over at Shing, who was still on Kris (he was still passed out), Sayle, and Junna and chuckled to himself.

“I’ve got quite the big catch here. Today’s results were better than what I’d expected, so I guess we’ll head back to the castle for now.”

“Would it not be better to rendezvous with Sir Ralphus, who’s acting as the decoy, as quickly as possible?”

Senoa cut in.

“Ralphus isn’t a decoy, silly. If things go badly, his unit might have to fight the real battle here.”

“Ehh?!”

All of Rain’s comrades’ voices sounded as one.

They all seemed to have been taken by surprise.

“— —That’s just how it is. What, did none of you notice why I had Ralphus go on first?”

They all exchanged looks. Rain continued,

“it’s fine if you didn’t. Except.....Ralphus might hate me for this later...”

Rain lamented as he rubbed the wound on his stomach.

Maybe it wasn’t for the best that I didn’t tell him anything, even if it was to end the war.

Everyone tilted their head to the side as they failed to understand what Rain was saying, so he shook his head as if to tell them not to mind.

Then, he suddenly turned to the messenger.

“By the way, you’re from my unit, right?”

“.....Yes! My name is Talon, and I’m a platoon leader from the second unit,” the messenger named himself.

He seemed horribly disappointed by what Rain had asked him, though his sentiments were understandable.

“Alright, Talon. Good work, and I need you to return to the castle and tell the Princess that we’ll “be back soon.” It’s faster than writing up another letter.”

“Yessir!”

“And about that——”

Rain came up close and personal in the poor guy named Talon’s face.

He stared at Talon hard enough that he could’ve bored holes with his serious-looking eyes.

“Wha, what is it?”

“——It’s not that big of a deal. But don’t say any more to the Princess than you need to. All you have to do is tell her that “the General is in good health and has won a heroic victory!” Don’t you dare tell her that I was “sitting down in a pool of my own blood” and worry her even if by mistake. Got it?”

“.....If, if you say so, General.”

Rain stared hard at Talon and observed the later for a while before finally nodding once.

Then, he whispered by Talon’s ear,

“as long as you understand. It’s best that you don’t think that I don’t play favorites, you know~. Your report to the Princess just might have an enormous impact on your future career opportunities.”

“I, I’ll only report to her about your sweeping victory! I haven’t seen anything else!”

Talon nodded almost ten times as he pledged in a hurry.

Rain pat him on the shoulder before giving Gazaram an order.

“Let the other prisoners other than Sayle and the lot here go free. We’ll return to the castle once that’s taken care of!”

And so, the “Battle of Dead Valley” was concluded with Rain’s complete victory.

Epilogue: Premonition

Rain, who had safely returned to his castle, had planned to sleep for the first time in a while after reporting to Shelfa about his victory.

Rain normally set aside nighttime for training and only slept once every few days or so. His powers as a Dragon Slayer were what allowed him to live such an absurd lifestyle.

Anyhow, he had been planning to take the day off, but——

Shelfa was rather reluctant to let Rain go, likely because he had been away for too long.

They had begun what Shelfa liked to call “storytelling” in the evening, and it had already become nightfall by the time he had noticed.

In any case, the princess simply loved being by Rain’s side and was very, very happy to be “storytelling” together with Rain.

Rain, for his part, also tried spend time with Shelfa whenever he could.

Even now, he had pulled up a chair next to the bed she was lying in (her bedtime had long since passed) and was telling her tales of his past exploits.

“——And so, the world I saw back then was different from our own. Do you get what I mean?”

“I can imagine it, more or less,”

Shelfa answered with a super-serious look on her face as she nodded up and down.

She should have been fairly sleepy by now, but she didn’t show it at all.

“You mean to say that.....there is more than one world out there, yes?”

“That’s right. If there exist worlds with daemons, there also exist worlds without them. The world I happened to catch a glimpse of was probably just one of those many worlds..... It was a different world from this one, but there was also a lot it had in common, strangely enough.”

“.....My favorite world is the one where you are, Rain, regardless of which one that is.”

“That so?”

Rain laughed and moved his right hand a little from where Shelfa couldn’t see. He continued, “you should hurry and go to sleep soon.It’s long past your bedtime.”

Shelfa shook her head a little but was unable to fight back against her sleepiness.

Eventually, she gently closed her eyes and fell asleep.....

Rain smiled at Shelfa’s defenseless sleeping figure that was filled with a deep sense of security and stroked her golden hair.

Then, he unclasped the small hand that was wrapped around his own and placed it underneath her covers. He got up quietly so he wouldn’t wake her and left Shelfa’s bedside.

He turned to the small mirror hanging from the wall and stared deeply into his own reflection.

“I have a hunch that something’s about to happen.....”

he quietly whispered to himself.

“It looks like some grim reaper or another out there has their sights on me.”

He saw his lips curl up sarcastically inside of the mirror.

“Fine. Come and try to defeat me if you can. I’ll be waiting for you anytime.....”

As always, there was not even a hint of fear within him.

Side Story: Someday, Surely

Part 1

“Alright, are you guys ready?!”

Gazaram turned around and glared at his men, who were hiding within the bushes.

Seven nervous faces, including his vice-captain Jess’, nodded back at him. Yet, a few of them were showing obvious signs of fear.

There was also someone who looked oddly hesitant as they dropped their gaze down to the thin layer of snow that had piled up the night before.

That he didn’t want to do this was written plainly on his face.

Gazaram didn’t blame him for it.

The members of the garrison that had been dispatched from the capital were different from knights. They were originally a group of volunteer soldiers who guarded towns and villages, and battle was not their calling.

And so, they were hesitant when they had to risk their lives like they had to now and were just as afraid as anyone else. After all, they were originally just upright citizens living in the towns and villages in the area.

(.....But I’m a different story. I was a knight who’s calling is to fight. I’m used to these scenes of carnage.)

Gazaram didn’t necessarily think that this meant that he’d definitely survive, but he still gave a big nod to encourage his men.

“Then, let’s hurry up and get this over with,”

he said with the most composed voice he could muster and deliberately

walked out of the grove of trees they were hiding in.

The fight was about to begin.

—About a month ago, two wannabe adventurers, called the Golt brothers, had gathered up a bunch of ruffians and began to do as they pleased.

Once, mercenaries could find employment almost anywhere they looked, but there had been absolutely no wars in the North as of late, which meant that it had become difficult for those whose only marketable skill was in doing battle to put food on the table.

Such men could only take one of two paths to survive.

One was to enter the garrison, like Gazaram had, and the other was to stain your hands in crime— Thus, the Golt brothers had chosen the path that would earn them the most amount of money in the least amount of time and had devastated the towns and villages in the neighborhood as a result.

Unfortunately, there were many men like the Golt brothers in the area. They had grown in numbers in the blink of an eye and had become a major threat to the region.

It was also troubling that they knew where they stood and never overdid things, which meant that matters never progressed to the point where a group of knights would get dispatched from the capital.

It put Gazaram and the garrison in a tight spot.

After all, their superiors were telling them that they were neglecting their duties and the villagers were pestering them to do something about the situation.

It was hard to deal with the people who complained because they couldn't have cared less about the garrison's circumstances.

For example, they refused to take the difference in military strength between the ruffians and the garrison into account.

And yet, it wasn't as if they had the guts to do anything about it themselves either.

— *Well, whatever.*

In any case, they had finally gotten a chance.

The garrison had received intel that the majority of the ruffians had left to make money in some town far away.

Gazaram didn't know how many ruffians were left behind, but he knew that this was the best time to chip away at their military strength.

Gazaram walked, and walked, on the remaining snow as he quietly approached the building that the ruffians used as their base.

His men followed fearfully behind him.

The building, which was built in the middle of the forest, did not particularly have any guards on watch and was deathly silent.

It was impossible to see inside of the building because there were curtains covering every window.

The front door, however, was half-open.

There was an extremely thin layer of snow piled on top of the shabby table and chairs on the porch that jutted out of the building and on the building's roof.

There was smoke rising from the chimney, proof that there were people inside.

However, not a single one of them could be seen.

— *There isn't a single soul here.*

Gazaram suddenly stopped just a few steps away from the door.

".....What is it, Captain?"

His vice-captain, Jess, turned his stiffened face toward him.

“I know this feeling.”

“.....Sir?”

“It’s bloodlust.”

Gazaram pat his subordinate on the shoulder. Jess pulled his lips taut.

Yes, I know this feeling well.

My senses must have rusted quite a bit since I’ve only noticed it now.

It’s been two years since I retired from being a knight.....have I been away from battle for too long?

“There’s a chance they’re lying in wait to ambush us. Which means our surprise attack was a failure. You guys stay back and wait. I’ll go see how things are first.”

The expression on Jess’ face changed in a dizzying manner.

First, was the expression born from his sense of duty, then hesitation, then guilt—— His thoughts were written quite clearly on his face. *He’s young*, Gazaram thought.

Gazaram was over twenty years older than Jess, who was twenty-five.

It was time for him to be considerate and defend his junior’s honor.

“Jess, that was an order. Besides, it’s the obvious plan of action. I’m not planning on dying.....so do as I say,”

Gazaram ordered quietly.

“.....Yessir. If you say so, Captain.”

Jess was doing better than the rest since he was at least able to hide his emotions. Gazaram’s other six men were obviously relieved as they hurried away from him.

It was rough being captain.

But it would be even harder if one of his men died.

Gazaram placed his hand lightly on the hilt of his sword and headed for the entrance alone.

He had not meant to make any noise as he walked, but the porch creaked the moment he stepped onto the porch.

The creak sounded like someone had rang a bell next to his ear because it was so quiet otherwise.

Tch.

Gazaram opened the half-open door wider and grew a bit more serious as he slipped through. If this was an ambush, his enemy was already lying in wait for him.

Even still, he couldn't shake off the habits that had become ingrained in his body and he proceeded one step at a time while carefully examining his surroundings.

Something of a hallway stretched out from the other side of the entrance and there were stairways to the second level on the walls on either side.

Right in front of Gazaram was a conspicuously large door.

He felt a person's presence precisely from the other side of that door. However, the tingling bloodlust from earlier had disappeared without a trace.

He only felt a presence.....and from only one person.

Either the others had concealed their presences, or they weren't there to begin with.

He didn't think that second-rate wannabe mercenaries could pull off a first-rate move like concealing one's presence, so there was probably only one person there.

I don't like this, Gazaram thought.

The bloodlust that had been all too blatant earlier had vanished cleanly without a trace— as if its owner had let it out in place of challenging Gazaram in a loud voice.

He wondered what his opponent could possibly gain by putting the garrison on guard like that.

(Tch. But it's not like I can just not check it out. Ready yourself, Gazaram.)

Gazaram rebuked himself and placed his foot up against one of the two sides of the large double doors before him.

At the very least, there was only one presence there.....assuming that his senses from his younger years had yet to decay.

What was there to fear if there was only one enemy?

Once—no, he was living off his sword even now. No starving wannabe mercenary would be a match for him.

Gazaram took a deep breath, as if he was using it to clear away his hesitation, and kicked the door open with all his might.

The room was rather spacious.

Several large pillars supported the ceiling and there were tables placed here and there, as if it was a cafeteria. Except, it looked like the people who lived here had used the room as a tavern instead.

Gazaram thought rather calmly to himself as he gazed at the multiple corpses lying on the floor.

—I guess people actually become more composed when they see something that's too contrary to their expectations.

He thought this because he was still thinking calmly after seeing the corpses and beer bottles littering the ground.

All of the ruffians were dead on the ground. He had no doubt that they were all dead.

From the looks of it, they had all died from one splendid hit to their vitals.

Gazaram almost trembled uncharacteristically and finally managed to hold it

down. He swiftly raised his gaze and looked to the counter in front of him.

And standing before the counter——

Was a single boy. He was probably around fifteen, give or take——but not any older.

He had black hair and black eyes, was wearing a black shirt and pants on top of that, and was so thoroughly covered in black that he reminded Gazaram of a grim reaper.

No, the boy had literally been a grim reaper for the corpses that were fallen on the floor.

And yet.....if he had not been holding a sword in his hand, if the sword in his hand was not covered in blood, and if the shirt he was wearing wasn't wet with the same blood, Gazaram would have determined that the boy was a captive of the Golt brothers. This was because the boy's eyes were far too clear for someone who had committed such slaughter. He didn't look like the type of person who could kill without batting an eye.

The boy stared at Gazaram head on with his crystal-clear black eyes as he stood motionlessly in the room that was heavily shrouded by the stench of blood.

Gazaram felt like he would shiver again as he returned the boy's gaze. It was true that the boy's eyes were clear.....but they were also completely lacking in emotion, as if he had once seen hell with those very same eyes.

After a little while, the boy began to speak in a quiet voice.

"You.....look like you're *much* better than these guys."

Gazaram finally returned to his senses at the boy's voice.

"What's that now?"

"I can tell..... You're strong. You look like you can put up a decent fight."

"Which means to say that you really are the one who did this?"

"You'll have to defeat me if you don't want to die. You'll die here if you don't. You won't be able to defeat me if you don't give it everything you've got."

They weren't on the same page at all.

Gazaram grew irritated and tried to pull more detailed information out of the boy.

The boy didn't look like a villain in Gazaram's eyes, despite that he had just so clearly issued Gazaram a challenge.

He was also well on guard.

The boy's slim figure blurred a moment later.

"What?!"

He couldn't believe it.

To think that the boy could boast such speed.

Gazaram finally drew his sword and took his stance in a hurry.

His movements spoke of his accumulated years of training and experience.

However, the boy was already before his eyes in just a few fractions of a second.

Even though he had been on the other side of the room until just then.

Gazaram shuddered..... Just what was this pressure?

He felt a wave of power from his skinny boy that surpassed his own, a warrior who had been on the battlefield for decades, by far.

Gazaram thought that he had crossed blades with countless strong enemies in his past, and no one who knew of him would have denied this fact.

But he now realized that it was all a tremendous misconception.

His previous enemies were little better than wooden dolls when compared to the boy before him.

Just the pressure that the boy exerted alone convinced Gazaram that he was facing the strongest opponent he had ever met.

He moved mostly on instinct because he was overtaken by fear.

In other words, he kicked up the small table that had been in front of him.

He had done so in order to use it as a shield to protect himself with as he bought himself some time.

However, the boy climbed on top of another table and jumped high the moment the table Gazaram had kicked danced into the air, as if he had calculated it out beforehand.

Then, the boy twisted his body mid-air and vigorously kicked off the ceiling to gain momentum.

His judgement and reflexes were worthy of admiration.

Gazaram desperately blocked the longsword that attacked him from the air as the blood drained from his face.

He felt the impact.

The impact of the boy's full bodyweight plus the extra force his acceleration had given him.

That Gazaram was able to endure it was almost miraculous. He had managed to stave off such a heavy blow.

Perhaps that was why the goddess of fate had decided to smile upon him today. His opponent's sword had failed to withstand the blow and let out a distorted noise as it bent.

The boy looked a little irritated. It was the kind of irritation that was born when things didn't go as planned. His sword had been unable to keep up with his skill.

Even Gazaram had stopped hesitating.

Or rather, the boy was not an enemy he could hope to defeat if he hesitated any longer. Gazaram's only path for survival was in taking advantage of his opponent's misfortune.

And so, he swiftly stepped in and scythed his sword across the boy's torso as the latter landed.

——But all he managed to do was to swipe at the air.

Of all the things, the boy had thrown away the useless hilt of his sword, bent his upper body without the slightest hesitation, and had flown backward in a magnificent somersault.

He spun two, three times.....and he had seized another sword from one of the corpses on the ground by the time he was upright again.

There were no wasteful movements in any of his actions and they held a certain refined beauty to them.

It was as if he had polished the actions of “fighting” to the upmost limits.

Did he calculate what to do in every situation of the fight beforehand? It was ridiculous, but that was what Gazaram truly thought.

If not, there was no way that the boy could have moved as resolutely as he did.

(What a guy. I can't believe he's human!)

It wasn't the time to be impressed.

The boy's body had blurred again.

He ran up to Gazaram's eyes like he was the wind itself with an afterimage trailing behind him (as difficult as it was to believe, his body was really just a blur).

The tip of the boy's sword was already filling Gazaram's vision the moment that the sword flashed. It was so fast that he couldn't see the path that the sword had taken.

Gazaram was able to block it in a daze, but was blown away as a result. He only realized that he'd been kicked after he had crashed into a chair and landed disgracefully on his hands and knees.

He was fortunate that the boy's muscular strength was relatively normal in comparison to his genius sense for battle. In any case, Gazaram was able to twist his body while enduring the pain.

Incidentally, he had only been able to move by pure instinct.

The boy's sword thrust at the area right next to Gazaram's head in the blink of an

an eye. A few strands of Gazaram's hair had been cut away.

"T, this isn't funny!"

Gazaram rolled and desperately stood up after crashing into the leg of a table. His breathing was already ragged.

On the other hand, his opponent's breathing wasn't turbulent in the slightest.

The boy simply observed Gazaram in silence.

He could have dealt the finishing blow at any time he wished, but he was purposefully waiting for his opponent to get back up.

— — *What an annoying little brat.*

Was he trying to show off how composed he was?

Then, in a monotonous voice, the brat said,

".....are you done?"

"*pant pant*.....w, with what?"

"You'll die this time, if that was the best you've got. You won't get lucky like last time forever."

".....!"

Gazaram couldn't say anything in response. He disliked losing, but he discerned that there were people in the world who were so absolutely strong beyond imagining.

The boy wasn't being arrogant, but was simply stating the hard facts.

"Have you given up?That's fine too. But I won't let you off easy."

The boy vanished the moment the words left his mouth.

He had simply lowered his stance and ran forward, but it had looked like he disappeared because his movements and running speed were too out of the ordinary.

Gazaram managed to raise up his sword purely by survival instinct, but the boy's foot drew an arc and kicked the sword away. Then, Gazaram saw his silver blade reflecting back the lamp on the ceiling.

Gazaram watched the flash of light draw closer to his neck out of the corner of his eye as if it didn't concern him.

He didn't even feel frustrated because there was too much of a difference in their abilities. Death was knocking over his shoulder.

— — However.

Gazaram was saved yet again by the whims of either the goddess of fortune or the grim reaper, he didn't know which.

Jess' voice rang out just then.

"Ca, Captain!"

Gazaram's vice captain threw the door open and screamed loudly.

The sword suddenly stopped.

"— — Captain? You're not one of *them*?"

The boy asked after stopping his sword a hair's breath away from Gazaram's skin.

Gazaram just barely managed to shake his head after swallowing the saliva that had pooled in his mouth. He guessed that the boy was referring to the corpses lying on the ground.

"No.....I'm the captain of the garrison that was sent here from the capital."

The boy silently stared back at Gazaram and readily threw his sword away.

"— — Say that sooner, you useless old man."

The boy staggered after he spoke.

"H, hey!"

Gazaram somehow managed to hold up the boy who had fallen in his arms.

He complained as he did.

"Shit, I'm not that old yet!"

However, the boy had already passed out.

"What's with this brat? This is such a lame way to end things,"

Gazaram said as he converted his relief in the fact that his life had been spared into a shout.

Part 2

“Regarding that brat, I’ve thrown him into the cells while he was still unconscious, just as you ordered.”

“Good work.”

Gazaram downed his entire glass at once and enjoyed the burning heat of brandy traveling down his throat.

The tips of his fingers were still quivering ever so slightly.

It was good that he managed to hide it from Jess.....it wouldn’t be funny if word got out that the captain was trembling in fear.

“But, Captain...”

Jess stood at ease in front of Gazaram’s desk and hesitantly asked,

“isn’t he still just a kid? It looked like he killed out of legitimate self-defense too, so wasn’t it a bit much to throw him in jail?”

Gazaram did not reply immediately.

He cast a glance at the window of the garrison’s office.

After watching the snow, which had started to fall again, for a while, he let out a soft sigh.

“You know, Jess?”

“Yes?”

“I’d thought that there was no such thing as being a genius with a sword..... no, a genius at fighting even if there was a little bit of difference in individual talent. ——Until now, in any case. I’d thought that experience and training were the only paths to improving.”

Jess stared back at him in silence.

His blue eyes underneath his pale gold hair asked, “what is he trying to get at?”

“——It’s fine if you don’t understand. Anyway, don’t underestimate that brat. He’s a genius. He probably possesses enough talent that you or I will never be able to reach his feet no matter how many times we’re reborn.Geniuses really do exist.”

Gazaram added, “there’s no harm in being careful until we ask him why he was there,” with a hint of awe in his voice.

“Is he *that* strong?! Even though you’re a hero with many battles behind you, Captain?”

“That’s what I thought too.”

Gazaram laughed in self-ridicule and gently placed his still slightly trembling fingers under the desk.

He would probably have nightmares for a while.

“I was lucky today. If you’d came even a little later.....and if you hadn’t called me Captain.....I’d already be dead.”

As would you, Jess.

Gazaram whispered in his heart as he shuddered again. *Geesh, if he’d wanted to, he could’ve finished off the entire garrison. ——And easily.*

“Well.....he didn’t seem like a bad guy though.”

“.....No one gives a shit about whether he’s a bad guy or not after he’s killed so many people, even if it *was* out of legitimate self-defense,”

Jess said as he furrowed his brows.

His words were truly something an upright young man would say.

“We were planning to do the same thing, you know.”

Gazaram’s chair creaked as he stood up. He continued,

“lend me the jail keys while you’re here.”

When he went down to the underground prison and peered through the iron cell bars, he saw that the boy was laying down on the single-purpose iron bed.

The bed was in the front of the cell and the boy was laying down with his back toward Gazaram. Gazaram assumed he was sound asleep from the fact that he was hardly moving.

“.....It’s a bit much to hit him awake. Guess I’ll come back later.”

A sudden voice called out to Gazaram after he watched the boy for a short while and was about to a right-about back around.

“Do you need something?”

“Whoa!?”

Gazaram jumped.

This brat was bad for his heart.

“Say something if you’re awake, will you?”

“It’s not like I was pretending to sleep on purpose,”

the boy muttered as he got up.

He sat down sideways on the bed, brushed back his black hair, and stared at Gazaram.

His near-shameless composure was unfitting for his age, but his face still retained a hint of innocence.

“So, what do you want?”

“You’re such an unsociable brat..... Here, just eat up for now.”

Gazaram opened up the latch meant for giving prisoners food and put in the steaming bowl of soup he had brought.

The boy looked hesitant, the first reaction he had shown that was befitting of his age, upon seeing the fragrant bowl of soup.

“You don’t have any reason to give me this.”

“To shit with reason.....I’m just giving food to a guy I threw in jail. Eat it.”

After encouraging the boy, Gazaram added,

“you passed out because you were hungry back then, didn’t you? I heard your stomach growling, you know? It was hilarious, coming from someone as strong as you.”



He thought that the boy was being shy, but he had simply picked up the spoon.

“I’ll owe you one for this.”

“Look here, don’t you already owe me a hell lot more? Did you forget how you nearly killed me?”

“That was your fault.”

The boy replied like it was only natural as he wolfed down his meal. He continued, “you should’ve told me that you were with the garrison from the start. If you had, I wouldn’t have attacked you.”

“Yeah, that so? You aren’t cute at all.What’s your name?”

“——Rain.”

Gazaram thought that the boy wouldn’t answer, but he told him his name all too easily.

“.....That’s a strange name. My name’s Gazaram. Nice to meet you.”

“Gazaram? The Gazaram who was a captain of one of the Fanooj knight orders?”

The spoon in the boy’s hand stopped for a moment.

But, it started moving again soon.

“That’s right. You heard of me?”

Gazaram puffed out his chest a little, but Rain’s reply was unfortunately curt.

“Well, yeah. I’ve heard the rumors. But you weren’t as strong as I wanted you to be.”

.....I’ll put a cockroach in your soup next time, you shitty little brat.

Gazaram thought, but surprisingly, he wasn’t all that angry.

The boy’s a genius. I’m sure I’m not that big of a deal in his eyes.

Still, what had he meant when he said that Gazaram wasn’t “as strong as he wanted him to be”?

“Let me change the question. What were you doing there?”

“You saw me. I was killing them. Though, most of them were apparently out.”

“.....Why would you do something like that? You could’ve died. Do you understand?”

The spoon in Rain’s hand stopped completely for the first time since he had picked it up.

Then, he began to mutter to himself.

It was as if Gazaram wasn’t there, as if he was talking to himself.

“To become stronger.”

“What?”

“Stronger, stronger than anyone else, stronger than anything else in this world.....that’s my goal.”

This was probably what it meant to be utterly exasperated.

Gazaram had never heard of such a foolish reason before.

In other words, Rain had done that just to test out his skills.

Just what on earth was this brat thinking?

“.....I don’t really get it. You’re plenty strong enough already, you know? I don’t think there are many people across the continent who can beat you. There probably aren’t even many who can match you either.”

“But that number isn’t zero. Besides, I’m still lacking in muscular strength. And I still have weaknesses.It’s not enough. Not for me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, huh? Tell me about it.”

Gazaram tried to urge him on inconspicuously, but Rain suddenly closed his mouth.

He taciturnly put the bowl down and laid back down on the bed.

“Hey now?”

“I said too much. I don’t have anything else to say to you.”

“Look here.....are you really gonna go quiet now? I’ll have you executed if you don’t speak up.”

“Do as you like.It’s not like I really care.”

Rain’s indifferent words sounded completely serious to Gazaram.

Gazaram lingered there for a little while, but ultimately could do little else but back down.

Rain was officially released two days later. The garrison had no reason to imprison him any longer, as the fact that he had killed people with bounties on their heads was not only not a crime but was actually something to commend him for.

The boy had insisted that he was already fifteen, so there was no way for them to call his parents either.

However, it was a fact that they were interested in Rain until the very end.

Still, even Gazaram had never thought that he would see the boy again just three days later.

The heavy smell of alcohol and sweat wafted over from the open door. There was also a scream that sounded like it belonged to a girl.

A bunch of men with villainous faces, including the Golt brothers, pierced Rain with their gazes when he boldly entered the room.

“.....The fuck are you?”

A man with a scar on his cheek (the elder of the Golt brothers, according to his intelligence) asked roughly while twisting up the arm of the girl he had in his hands.

The men were apparently planning to do her, but she was still clothed as of yet.

Still, her cheeks were swollen, perhaps because she'd been hit multiple times for putting up what little resistance she could. The girl looked at Rain and reached out her slender hand toward him as if she was seeking salvation.

Rain grit his teeth audibly.

".....You guys are able to mess up a person's entire life like it's easy. Surely, you must be pretty strong——is what I'd like to say."

Rain drew his sword and spoke as if he was ridiculing them. He continued, "the reason that you've banded together like this is because you're weak. Those who're confident in their strength don't flock together with others. I don't normally bother with people like you, but——"

Rain glanced around the room.

A dozen or so men glared back at Rain as he continued to be impertinent.

"I don't like you guys, so I'll defeat you all here."

"Don't fuck with us, you cheeky little brat!"

Golt threw the girl aside and stood up.

The others also drew their sword in sync with their leader.

Rain haughtily ignored them and bent down toward the girl who was crawling on the floor.

"——Are you okay?"

His tone was so kind that it was difficult to believe that he was the same person who had been speaking so sharply just moments before.

The girl nodded repeatedly as if she was charmed.

She was still just a child.

"B, but..."

"Hm?"

"You have to run! These guys kill people like it's nothing!"

"Thanks. But I'll be fine because I'm really strong.....and more importantly, I'm sorry."

The girl's body crumbled before she could quizzically tilt her head to the side.

Rain sat the girl, whom he had made fall asleep with the back of his hand, down in the corner of the room and drew his own sword.

He wasn't particularly flustered as he confronted the entire group at once.

"Now, let's start. I'll praise you guys if you can last more than five minutes."

His black hair became a blur the moment the words left his mouth.

"Hey now, it's you again?"

Gazaram exchanged looks with Rain the moment he entered the room and subconsciously placed a hand on his forehead.

There was a mountain of corpses on the floor.

Unlike before, there were many more bodies this time.

And, as usual, the boy was unscathed.

"I came here to check up on this place because I heard that they found a new hideout, and this is what I find. What an unbelievable brat you are."

"Are you going to execute me?"

"There wouldn't be a point, since I doubt you'd die even if you were killed, idiot."

".....I was waiting for you."

"And why's that?"

"The girl over there."

Rain pointed to the girl sitting against the wall.

".....Is she alright?"

"Nothing serious happened, fortunately. But she's probably still pretty shocked. Have her escorted home, will you?I hope her family hasn't been killed off."

Gazaram wordlessly looked back at Rain and jerked his chin at Jess, who was

standing behind him.

Jess understood his captain's intentions even as he continued to blink in disbelief and called out orders to his men.

Eventually, someone gently carried the girl away.

"Hey now, where do you think you're going?"

Gazaram stopped Rain in a panic by grabbing the boy's shoulder as he also moved to leave the room.

"I was planning on traveling again. Or are you going to have me executed now?"

"Well, no.....you'd get released anyway."

Rain immediately began walking away again when Gazaram shook his head.

"W, wait!"

he called out before he knew it.

"Is there still something you want from me?"

"Show me your sword."

He forcefully pulled out Rain's sword. He inspected it closely and sighed.

"I knew it. It's all beat up again. The sword isn't able to keep up with your skills. Usually, it's the other way around.Anyway, it'll be the death of you one day. Your sword broke when we fought before too, didn't it?"

"——I'm strong even without any weapons."

"I'm sure you are. But listen up anyway. There's a mountain called Mount Delado up north from this town. And there's an ancient ruin about halfway up the mountainside....."

"Wha, Captain!"

Gazaram held Jess, who had abruptly looked up, back with a hand and continued.

"There's rumored to be this amazing weapon there. But, not only is the ruin is stacked with heaps of dangerous traps, but there are also guardians (the ruin's

protectors) lying in wait. On top of that.....”

“On top of that...?”

Rain asked in return. It seemed to have piqued his interest.

Gazaram continued, despite not having much confidence in his own judgement.

“On top of that, the sword choses its own master. Anyone who takes up the sword without the right qualifications dies after going mad.....or so the legends say.”

Rain’s reply was short and concise.

He simply said,

“I’ll go.”

Just like that, he turned around and walked toward the door. Gazaram’s men opened up a path for him in silence. To be honest, they were all probably creeped out because Rain was too strong for a brat his age.

Even Gazaram did not stop him this time.

Rain turned around just once before he left the room.

“——Old man.”

“Who do you think you’re calling an old man?!”

“.....Thanks for everything.”

And that was all he said.

After that, Rain left without looking back a second time.

“Captain, was it okay to tell him about that sword?”

“I know what you mean, Jess.”

Gazaram spoke as if to pacify his vice-captain while his eyes never left the open door. He continued, “that sword is dangerous. He might even lose his life in the ruin. But he’d still die anyway at this rate. No matter how strong he is. For now, I guess this is just my way of being a meddling busybody.”

“Did you take a liking to him or something? As unsociable as he is?”

Gazaram shrugged as Jess' exasperated tone.

"I guess. Though there's no doubt that he was pretty annoying."

"Then why?"

".....Well. How should I put it, maybe it's because his eyes were awfully clear —and now you're making me blush, you idiot!"

Gazaram grew embarrassed after he spoke and hit Jess in retaliation.

—Our Captain's a good person, if you look past the way he tries to speak while trying to make himself look good,

Jess thought to himself.

In the end, Gazaram cheerfully whispered to himself,

"Rain, was it? I doubt I'll ever forget that name..... It might even spread across the entire continent one day."

— Far away from where Rain and Gazaram were. —

Elenoa put away her knitting because her daughter had suddenly climbed up on her knees.

She looked to her daughter's face and furrowed her brows.

There were tears dripping down Shelfa's face.

".....My, did something happen?"

"I had a dream."

"A dream?"

"Mhmm."

Shelfa explained her dream as best as she could in her adorable voice and her

clumsy words. She said, “I had a dream about this older boy who’s stronger and nicer than anyone. He’s actually really nice, but he has to kill his own heart.”

“.....Is that so?”

When her mother tried to comfort her, Shelfa, as if she was still in the dream, said, “I’ll meet that boy one day. For sure!”

Elenoa was at a loss on how to reply because Shelfa was so full of confidence.

She felt like she shouldn’t just settle things by assuming it was just a mere dream.

After all, Shelfa was a special child. That was why Elenoa asked the thing that she was most worried about instead.

“.....Is this boy someone who will lend you his strength, Shelfa?”

“Yeah!”

A smile broke out on Shelfa’s angelic little face.

She was laughing even though she had been crying just moments ago, characteristic of a child her age. Elenoa was relieved to see her smile.

This child will need allies.....by all and any means.

Someone who’s stronger and kinder than anyone else.....I’d welcome such an ally with open arms. I’m sure someone like that wouldn’t misunderstand this child.

“I real~ly love that boy! I wanna meet him soon. And when I do, I’m gonna have him hug me lots——”

A gentle breeze stroked the jovial Shelfa’s cheek.

She would meet Rain as she wished in the not too distant future.

Vol. 3 Afterword

Afterword

I've written the afterword for this volume, but *Rain* was originally a short story of only about ten pages long. It was also written back when I wrote things by hand, so the raw manuscript was composed in ugly handwriting when you looked at it and had a muddy aura.

This was about almost ten years ago, but, in any case, at the time I was moved by the panic of, "I have to set about writing a novel in earnest!" Naturally, it was a panic born of having procrastinated too much until that point, but it is true that I was moved by the impulse that.....I had to get things in motion.

But, no matter how much I loved reading, it was too reckless to suddenly challenge myself to write a long novel——I thought at the time.

So, I would first warm up by writing short stories and get used to writing compositions.....that is what I thought.

It sounded like a pretty good idea, but I (and I wasn't very good at writing long stories) was pretty bad at short stories to the bitter end, and I did not think that they were very good even though I had taken great pains to write them.

Still, I, tenacious about the strangest things, stitched together stories and continued to write on my manuscript paper in small handwriting and ended up writing several dozen short stories. One of them was the first prototype for *Rain*.

.....But, when I looked at it, it was the worst out of the lot.

After all, the outline of that volume of *Rain* had basically been crammed into a short story of only thirty pages almost just as it was. There was a limit to how unreasonable things could be.

I don't have the manuscript with me anymore so I can't confirm, but it is

mysterious even to me that it was possible.

However, I wasn't going to be satisfied until I had someone read it either way, so I had my friend read it.Strangely enough, they gave it a favorable reputation. Though I set it aside for a little while, it might have become the foundation for me to re-write it as a long story later.

In any event, Rain is quite the tenacious guy.....

I received the help of many people this time as well.

I give my passionate thanks to all of the people who supported me in bringing out this book.

And lastly, of course, I give my earnest thanks to you who has this book in your hands.

June 2006 Respectfully yours, Takumi Yoshino

Paperback Edition Afterword

I admire those who have abundant talent.

But, only gods can be truly omnipotent, so those kinds of existences are a different story.

For example, if you, who is reading this, are a student, you might have an idea of someone with abundant talent as one or two of your classmates.

Your classmates might easily understand lectures that you have a difficult time with, or get good marks on tests even though they haven't really previewed or reviewed the material. Or, maybe it's someone who draws something that's "already a fine work of art!" during art class, unlike your scribble-level piece (that's how it looks like to you).

Or someone who had never written a novel before, but the first thing they write is good enough to wow the judges!!

That last example had a bit of my own envy mixed into it——

It's not limited to students, and working people might also surprisingly have

an idea of someone in the same company who “works better than the rest,” perhaps?

Indeed, you might be hesitant to call them geniuses, but owners of abundant talent might be closer to you than you think. People are never equal to begin with.

Naturally, for someone like me who is incompetent and lacking in ability, I can’t help but be jealous and jealous of those who were blessed with that kind of talent. If only I had more talent.....ahh, how many times have I sagged my shoulders and thought such thoughts in my life until now?

——However, talented people and geniuses should have their own respective worries.

Rain is a possessor of rare talent when it comes to fighting, but he might not really be happy about that. As a bonus, he’s actually quite awkward with anything other than fighting, and there are even times when he is worse at things than others. He looks more arrogant than anyone else at a first glance, but in truth, he is timider than anyone on the inside——or he might be.

Besides, besides, the people who he lost in the past won’t return to his side no matter how strong he becomes. This has already cast a dark shadow over Rain’s heart.

But even still.....even still, in the end, from my, a mediocre person’s, point of view, Rain is an enviable man.

As a mediocre author, I want to watch over where my brooding protagonist is going even as I am anxious about it. And, I hope he will one day arrive at an appropriate end to his journey.

I give my passionate thanks to all of the people who supported me in bringing out this book.

And lastly, of course, I give my earnest thanks to you who has this book in your hands.

Respectfully yours, Takumi Yoshino